WHEN THE WORLD SLEEPS

STORIES, WORDS AND WOUNDS OF PALESTINE

FRANCESCA ALBANESE

Translated from the Italian by Gregory Conti

ALSO BY FRANCESCA ALBANESE

Palestinian Refugees in International Law
(coauthor with Lex Takkenberg)

A Moon Will Rise from the Darkness:
Reports on Israel's Genocide in Palestine

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EXCERPTS FROM FRANCESCA ALBANESE'S SPEECH TO THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, OCTOBER 30, 2024

For the first time, I'm really upset. I'm upset at people's indifference.

The intensity of this genocide and the way it enters into our lives and the fact that some people are not affected by it while others are devastated.

To think that I find myself once again in front of the people who represent most of the countries that, either all together or some smaller group, could stop this. Really, at the stroke of a pen.

I always experience a sense of shock and disappointment when I come to this room because many of you recited the same script from last year.

Of course, we condemn Hamas's attack. Of course, we express solidarity with the Israeli victims. Of course, we demand the release of the hostages.

But is it possible that after forty-two thousand people have been killed, you cannot empathize with the Palestinians?

Those of you who have not uttered a word about what is happening in Gaza demonstrate that empathy has evaporated from this room. Empathy is the glue that makes us stand united as humanity. This is not about charity toward the Palestinians. This is about your obligations. Your obligations include ensuring the full implementation of the conventions to prevent the crime of genocide.

And therefore, today, if you really want to comply with international law, there is no other way than by imposing sanctions on Israel and revising the diplomatic, economic, political, military, and strategic ties you have with it.

And may this be the last genocide in human history.

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PREFACE

I AM WRITING THESE WORDS at a strange moment in my life: I have just been sanctioned by the United States. As of July 9, 2025, I have been named a "specially designated national" by the Department of the Treasury, barring all US nationals, including my own daughter, and corporations from engaging with me and causing the freezing of my assets in the United States.

I am the first UN official in history to receive such a sanction — one I share with Vladimir Putin, Bashar al-Assad, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and Nicolás Maduro — for the absurd "crime" of allegedly working with the International Criminal Court. In reality, I have been targeted for reporting on Israel's violations of Palestinian human rights — or, as the United States chooses to frame it, "anti-Semitism." This label does a grave disservice to Jewish people worldwide and risks trivializing the history and reality of hatred against Jews. These sanctions are punishment for my insistence on fulfilling my UN mandate under the harshest circumstances, when the people of Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian Territory were enduring unspeakable suffering.

I did not set out, at the start of my life, to confront power in this way. I was born and raised in a small mountain town in southern Italy — a place few leave and even fewer move to. My adolescence was shaped by a visceral rejection of injustice. At that time, the Mafia's violence — its assassinations of judges, lawyers, and journalists — left an indelible mark on me. After the anti-Mafia prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino were murdered in 1992, Sicily found the strength to erupt in outrage. Ordinary people began to stand together against organized crime, joined in solidarity by Italians from other regions.

From this, I learned that unity and courage are the most powerful forces for change. At eighteen, after my father passed away, I sought refuge in the rationality of law. Although a sense of social justice had long been in my veins, the order, structure, and logic of legal disciplines offered reassurance. I was also lucky to have a strong and supportive mother always by my side, graciously holding my hand or with her arm on my shoulder, at every moment of need.

At university, I started to find my path. I joined a collective of critically engaged students, animating the cultural life of the law school and representing my peers in academic institutions. My political conscience started to manifest. For example, I took it personally when my department sought to honor Giovanni Gentile, Mussolini's minister of education who signed the 1938 racial laws that condemned thousands of Italian Jews to death. I helped mount a protest, and we won: The commemorative plaque to honor the memory of Gentile was not placed in the law school.

To support myself, I worked one, two, sometimes three jobs at the same time, and still graduated with the highest honors. Those years allowed me to travel, study English abroad, and glimpse horizons far wider than my small town. Becoming a practicing attorney-at-law was never my calling. I did complete my law degree but had no interest in the bar; I wanted to be a human rights lawyer, using the law to defend those whose rights had been denied, beyond the courtroom — an idea that scarcely existed in Italy then. (While in the United States "lawyer" is tied to bar admission, internationally the title is widely used for specialists in law in both academic and professional settings. That is where I belong: *me voilà.*)

For a brief moment, I even entertained the idea of becoming a journalist, but it faded when a generous scholarship — and the chance to study in the charming city of Lecce, in my beloved southern Italy — drew me back to international law and development.

It was during one of my many student jobs that I first stepped into the world of international affairs, with an internship at Italy's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That experience opened the door to my first missions abroad, to Pakistan, Guinea-Bissau, and more fundamentally to a UN

scholarship, which took me to Morocco for two years, where I both enjoyed traveling and worked as an unwilling chronicler of injustices and human rights abuses. This led me to want to further pursue postgraduate studies in human rights law, so I decided to enroll in an LLM program at the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

SOAS played a decisive role in shaping my intellectual trajectory. As a postgraduate student, I first encountered critical approaches to international law and development studies, and it was a total epiphany, though not pain free of course. This is where I met Edward Said — not in person but through his writings. *Orientalism* and his other works offered me the language and framework to understand the politics of representation, the construction of "the Other," and the distortions embedded in Eurocentric legal narratives and development approaches. These ideas were not always comfortable, but they were irresistible in their power to unveil the world as it is. Said, along with Antonio Gramsci — another of my intellectual lighthouses — helped me grasp how culture sustains power, and how resistance begins by questioning the stories power tells.

These influences left a profound mark on my work and the choices I made from that point forward. What followed was four years with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, when I was based in Geneva but traveled across the Arab world and Southeast Asia. Eventually, I moved to Palestine to work with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), fulfilling what had since SOAS become my "dream" of going to Palestine. In London I had studied the question of Palestine through a legal lens and was left with a sense of insurmountable and enduring injustice that, with my good intentions and hard work, I felt totally equipped to help resolve! (Not to be missed is how much my good intentions were tinged with white-savior illusions, which would soon be shattered by reality.)

As a UN lawyer in occupied Jerusalem, often traveling across Gaza, the West Bank, and the neighboring countries where millions of Palestinian refugees still lived, I wrestled daily with the dissonance between the principles of international law — equality, justice, dignity — and the

realities of power politics. Nowhere was this gap more visible than in Palestine, where the international community's inaction made a mockery of the law it claimed to uphold. This contradiction ultimately led me to leave the United Nations, first to pursue other job opportunities and then independent research.

After Palestine I moved to Washington, DC, where my husband had joined the World Bank and where we welcomed our first daughter, Leila. To celebrate her US citizenship, we decided to make the first and biggest investment of our lives: a small but lovely condo in Adams Morgan. Unlike my husband, who didn't particularly love DC life, I slowly fell into a pleasant relationship with the city. Yes, there were the lobbyists, but there were also lovely parks: the first huge green spaces I truly experienced in a city. I still remember what I call the "green, red, and yellow baptism": the first rain of leaves I encountered during one of my early walks in town, while, with my relatively small eight-month belly, I toured potential condos with a Realtor, searching for the nest where I would give birth. I also traveled across the racial contradictions that survive, often painfully, under the skin of the city and are reflected in its urban geometries and demography.

As a new mom to a wonderful girl, I began exploring the city and, slowly, the United States. I used my maternity leave to step away from human rights work for a while and trained to become a yoga teacher, which was the most spirituality I could absorb at the time. But the continuous bombing of Gaza — in 2012 and 2014 — pulled me back in. With Leila tied to my chest, I began attending protests, trying to assuage the guilt I felt for being away from my UNRWA colleagues and the people of Gaza who were mourning their loved ones. The sense of impotence was suffocating. I remember joining a sit-in in front of Target on Columbia Road in the summer of 2014 and crying on the shoulders of volunteers from Jewish Voice for Peace. That was the beginning of my friendship with many DC-based peace activists. I also began volunteering as a yoga teacher for disadvantaged communities, from Columbia Road to Anacostia.

It did not take long before, despite a well-paid but emotionally unfulfilling job as a “technical expert” with an American NGO, my heart and mind returned to Palestine. This time, it was for research, which I conducted while an external researcher affiliated with Georgetown University’s Institute for the Study of International Migration.

Four years later, after another international move — this time to Indonesia — and the birth of my son, Giordano, my research culminated in a book on Palestinian refugees in international law, published by Oxford University Press in 2020. For Palestinian refugees, “refugee status” is more than a legal label; it is the lived experience of exile from a homeland that once existed. Their plight made clear to me that any resolution must address the collective right of the Palestinian people to self-determination. This became the focus of my first report as a UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, a role I assumed in 2022.

Professor Michael Lynk, my predecessor, had first sparked my curiosity eighteen months earlier. After attending several of my online book talks, he asked whether I had considered expressing interest in the position. “You have stellar UN experience, academic credentials, a kind spirit, and you’re a great communicator…” I still remember my husband’s gaze from the back of the room as I Zoomed with Michael: *This is so not going to happen, Franci.*

But it did. From an extraordinary pool of candidates, the Human Rights Council chose me for this voluntary position, created in 1993 to document and report to the UN on violations committed by Israel as the occupying power in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem — territories under military occupation for twenty-six years by then. I am the eighth person, and first woman, to serve as the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Palestinian territory occupied by Israel since 1967. Though the work is pro bono, the mandate is demanding.

In this role, as one among more than fifty UN independent experts (the crown jewel of the UN, as late UN secretary-general Kofi Annan used to call us), I strive to embody what Said modeled: a truthful witness. Impartiality does not mean indifference; it means investigating rigorously,

judging facts against the law, and speaking truth to power — even when it's inconvenient. In Palestine, this entails exposing the deep asymmetry between occupier and occupied, colonizer and colonized, and showing how decades of dispossession have been normalized by an international community that is unwilling to act.

The journey from a small southern Italian town to the heart of international law has been marked by restlessness, conviction, and an irrevocable intolerance for injustice. If there is one lesson I carry with me, it is this: Standing together with courage, even against entrenched power, makes change not only possible but inevitable.

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THIS BOOK was originally written for an Italian audience, and in its first few months, it was an absolute success. At every stop on the Italian book tour, I was met by thousands of people, all eager to learn more about the situation in Palestine and how they could contribute. This enthusiasm is unusual for an essay, all the more so for a book written by a jurist on a topic that has been systematically erased from the public agenda by a subservient press and the ideology of those in power.

Given the impact this book has had in Italy, I was glad to hear that a US publisher was interested in bringing it out in English. All the more as the United States remains the main obstacle to a peaceful resolution of the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory because of unconditional US support for Israel. By shielding Israel from the proper consequences for its actions in front of the international community — whether diplomatically through its veto in the Security Council or materially through billions of dollars of arms shipments to Israel that allow it to maintain the status quo of occupation, or the sanctioning of people and institutions critical of Israel, as has happened to me and many others working for justice, from the International Criminal Court to Palestinian human rights organizations — the United States has fostered a culture of impunity for Israel that has allowed it to commit the worst of crimes.

At the time this book is being translated, the Gaza genocide is a part of our history: a blemish on humanity for which our grandchildren will hold us to account. This is said and done; now the task at hand is to stop the genocide and find a way forward. This book is a small effort toward that end. In presenting the ten stories that follow, I aim to grapple with the past and present of Palestine, with the hope of imagining a better future for all who share the land. I don't aim to sugarcoat the gruesome reality in which we live today; make no mistake, these stories are brutal, devastating, and heart-wrenching, many of them told straight from ground zero of genocide, others from the unimaginable position of those who have been forced to watch the atrocities unfold from afar.

Yet even as these stories present a picture of pain and despair, it is my hope that they will also bring an understanding that peace in Palestine and in the entire region is possible — that this land can be a home for Jews, Christians, Muslims, and anyone who calls the Holy Land home, regardless of whatever name the land goes by — through a grounding in universal justice and accountability for all. Each story offers a different, complementary lens from which to view the ongoing genocide and the global missteps that brought us to this point, and presents the raw human experiences from which we might fashion an alternative, shared future for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

What might that future look like? Though any long-term solution will need to be decided upon by Israelis and Palestinians themselves, I can say with confidence that a lasting peace will require sacrifice from everyone, most of all from Israelis — not of their rights as human beings, to live in peace, security, and dignity with their neighbors, but of their privileges as citizens of a settler colony built on the denial of indigenous self-determination. True peace can only be built on equality and freedom for all, grounded in a vision of universal justice that affords equal rights and responsibilities to all, regardless of their race or nationality.

Not to betray Said's message, I resolutely include the Israelis in this rehumanizing discourse. Like the Palestinians, they are part of an anachronistic settler-colonial endeavor, of course with unequal

responsibilities and suffering. Ending Jewish Israeli domination will be a rehumanizing act. No one can oppress and brutalize others without themselves experiencing a loss of humanity in the process.

And meanwhile, one thing is for certain: This future will be made possible only by the work we do today. What matters now is that the current injustice is stopped immediately and further injustice is prevented; it is up to us, international civil society, lawyers, students, and citizens of the world, to take responsibility and use our voices to demand our governments meet their obligations and protect the multilateral international order that is threatened now more than ever.

When the world sleeps, it falls on us, we the people, to wake it up — and now more than ever the world needs an awakening.

INTRODUCTION

Is solidarity a political form of love?

> I became a refugee at the age of ten. What stands clearly in my child's mind was the identity of the invisible enemy who destroyed my life. What did he look like? Was he a human or a beast? Why did he make me a refugee? What had I done to him? Where did he come from? What language does he speak?
> — SALMAN ABU SITTA, *Mapping My Return*

IN RECENT TIMES I have found myself thinking very often about George Orwell. His famous proclamation, according to which "War is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is force," has never seemed to me to be more topical and pertinent than in the debate of recent months on Israel and Palestine.

For example, many people continue to speak of what is happening in Gaza as a "conflict." Or, even worse, as a conflict that began on October 7, 2023. In this reading there is all the superficiality of those who start a book halfway through, ignoring the preceding pages that contain vivid traces of blood and pain, a story that actually has its roots much further back and that continues to remain ignored.

Similarly, the call to justice that the Palestinian people have been raising for almost a century, their protests against the regime of apartheid that has oppressed them for generations, remains muffled and unheard, just like the senseless tragedy of what has been happening since the end of 2023 and continues to happen even after the supposed ceasefire between January and September 2025: a full-blown genocide.

—

THE HORROR IN GAZA is unprecedented. When I say that Israel is writing one of the darkest pages of history, comparable to the genocides of the past, many people tell me that we do not yet know for sure, that we have to wait for the verdict of the International Court of Justice. But the court — the body established to settle disputes between states and issue advisory opinions on questions of international law — already affirmed the risk of genocide in January 2024, ordering states to take action to stop Israel's genocidal acts. Many countries, however, seem not to have understood this, or have deliberately ignored it. The international treaty is called the Convention on the *Prevention* and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: How can states prevent it, if not by acting promptly when the risk arises (as the Court of Justice states)?

And even leaving aside the legal aspect, how is it possible not to express oneself in the face of atrocities of this level of ruthlessness?

When I was in Berlin in May 2024, a few weeks after presenting a report called "Anatomy of a Genocide" to the UN, mine was still one of the few voices denouncing in these terms the crimes of Israel that were underway in Gaza. Excluding the pending proceedings initiated by the South African government at the International Court of Justice in December 2023, alleging that Israel was committing acts of genocide against the Palestinian population in Gaza, there was virtually no other literature on the subject.

Some illustrious scholars, such as the historian Raz Segal, had spoken of genocide immediately after October 7th, but theirs were isolated voices. Ilan Pappé, another well-known Israeli historian, also denounced Israeli practices in the Gaza Strip as an *incremental genocide* in 2006: a genocide that gradually increases in violence and intensity. Yet within the United Nations no one dared to utter that forbidden word about Israel. No one except myself and a few other UN speakers, especially those from countries of the Global Majority (or Global South), for many of whom the trauma of

colonization and genocide that Europeans have perpetrated over the course of half a millennium from Latin America to Africa to Asia is still alive.

“Anatomy of a Genocide” was the first report to provide the United Nations with a detailed denunciation of the fact that Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip revealed an intention to annihilate Gaza as such, to destroy everything. In Berlin, where a series of meetings and conferences awaited me, I was welcomed with great interest from civil society and the German think tank community.

Less than a year later, the reception in Germany for a new round of public events turned out to be very different. Today there are many voices that support my interpretation of the facts and their legal qualification as genocide: illegal occupation, settler colonialism, and apartheid, among other offenses imputable to the State of Israel. But the repression of the message I bring, of my functions, and of my person has grown in unprecedented ways, as has intolerance in the debate on the Israeli question. So, what has changed?

—

JUST BEFORE I ARRIVED in Germany in February 2025, the two university events I was supposed to attend were canceled under political pressure. The first — a lecture at the University of Munich — was canceled immediately. However, thanks to the students, I was still able to give the lecture in a refugee reception center that does not depend on the government but is supported by private funds and has a courageous director who did not give in to pressure.

At the University of Berlin I was supposed to give a lecture along with Eyal Weizman, an Israeli expert in forensic architecture. However, when we arrived, the university had already canceled the public event. They proposed holding it behind closed doors, but we refused; it wouldn’t have made sense to have gone all the way there to hold a meeting that could only be followed online. Some professors and students managed to move the event to a cultural center that could accommodate up to six hundred people

(although at that point there were already twelve hundred registered). However, the Israeli ambassador, the police, several politicians, a government minister, and other institutional figures pumped up the pressure. After pushing the university to cancel the conference, they threatened to revoke the grants to the cultural center if it agreed to host the event. Faced with the risk of having to close due to lack of funds, the center gave in, only to find the next morning its walls daubed with the writings of the usual pro-Israel groups, insulting me and the United Nations: ALBANESE ANTI-SEMITE, ALBANESE TERRORIST.

In the end, the event was held anyway, but at the headquarters of the newspaper *Junge Welt*, where there was only room for a hundred people. Outside there were a lot of people crammed together. Meanwhile, the police had surrounded the building with officers in riot gear, with batons and machine guns in plain sight. It was in this setting that Eyal and I spoke of peace for a people who are suffering.

In Germany, as in other parts of Europe and increasingly, shamelessly in the United States, repression has taken on extremely violent tones. In recent months I have had the opportunity to read many times about police charges against students and those who demonstrate with them. And sometimes to witness these scenes with my own eyes. The forces of law and order beat, club, and imprison people of all ages and nationalities: first and foremost, Palestinians and anti-Zionist Jews.

The drama is twofold: Not only are these people fighting to stop atrocious crimes but they are doing so by exercising their sacrosanct right to criticism and dissent, a right which is a corollary to the even more fundamental freedom of expression and which should be one of the bulwarks of our so-called liberal democracies.

What does democracy consist of, if there can be no room for debate?

Of the people from the think tanks I had met in Berlin the previous year, none showed up this time. Of the eighteen NGO delegates, only three came.

Then, the evening before the event at the headquarters of *Junge Welt*, there was a threat of arrest. The German federal police contacted the sponsoring organizations to warn me not to appear, otherwise I could be

arrested for violating German anti-Semitism laws. After an almost sleepless night, at six in the morning I called my husband and told him: “I don’t know what I have to do, Max…I know I’m doing the right thing, but I don’t want to be arrested, I haven’t seen the children for twenty days.”

He replied, seraphic: “You go ahead and do what you have to do. We are here.”

So I went.

But the UN had to intervene, reminding the German police that as the UN Special Rapporteur I enjoy diplomatic immunity, and that my arrest would have been an unprecedented scandal. Only then did they back down, but in any case the event was practically under siege: In addition to the twenty or so police vans outside the newspaper’s headquarters, officers in riot gear packed the room. I arrived with a smile, pretending everything was fine. When I went onstage, my heart was full of indignation, but that did not prevent me from expressing myself clearly and precisely. At the end of the event, Michael Barenboim, a violinist and professor at the Barenboim-Said Akademie, played with Palestinian violinists. It was beautiful. And the next day, Melanie Schweizer, a German government official who had attended the event, and who had already been suspended for her critical stance on Israeli policies, was fired.

This is the level of repression in Germany today.

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AS MY COLLEAGUE IRENE KHAN, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, said a year ago, the crisis in Gaza is now a symptom of a global crisis.

I think more and more often that all of this, while it is bound to instill fear, must also give us courage. The system that represses the Palestinians — a well-established alliance between Israel and all the other states whose elites guarantee it the impunity it has always enjoyed — is the same one to which we belong. It is the system that decides for us on issues that are crucial to our lives, without listening to us and representing us; it is the

system that transforms secure jobs into part-time and temporary work, rights into privileges, that alienates us from each other, making us all more fragile and insecure; that considers solidarity a subversive act and empathy a form of mental and social dysfunction. These are subtle mechanisms, that day after day contribute to unraveling ties and compromising our ability to act together for a just cause, from the environment to Palestine, from precarious jobs to gender issues. I have often reflected on the fact that for me Palestine was the red pill in *The Matrix,* the one that opens your eyes to the hidden reality of things. My work, all the study of the Palestinian question over the years, has helped me to see and understand better the system in which we live. And, in a counterintuitive way, to continue to love it.

Lately I have really understood the value of courage that is needed to clog the gears of the system. I have had many opportunities to observe and ask myself questions, during months of incessant travel in which I have met a multitude of people and heard their stories: representatives of the authorities, members of civil society, scholars and intellectuals, workers, trade unionists, and, above all, students and ordinary people. Special people who are searching for useful and important words, who want to find hope to exchange and share. It has happened to me in the United States, Australia, Spain, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Portugal, Egypt, Jordan, Canada, and, many times, in Italy. Even in Belgium, where the presence of the European institutions — sometimes more linked to bureaucracy than to the effectiveness of the result — often makes the air particularly heavy. It’s been a long journey that has allowed me to grasp the transversal impulse of many communities in search of justice, truth, dignity, and a better future, beyond our differences.

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IN PUTTING TOGETHER the book that you have in your hands, physically and virtually surrounded by all of these travel companions, I have therefore chosen to dedicate to ten people dear to me the story of the themes that I

consider fundamental to an understanding of the history, present, and future of Palestine. These ten people, with their teaching, their testimony, and sometimes even their presence, have accompanied my journey of learning through a land that has suffered for too long.

It will therefore be Hind, who died at the age of six for the crime of being Palestinian, who will open our eyes to what it means to be children in a country where for generations minors have not had the right to have a nest that protects them and respects their roots. It will be George, one of my closest friends from the years when Max and I lived in Jerusalem, who will introduce us to the streets on both sides of the city, among the wonderful houses of the past, the bookstores where today children's books are seized by the Israeli military, and the clubs where, until a few years ago, it was possible to go dancing alongside those same Israeli boys, in this case not in uniform. It will be Ingrid, a European woman who chose Palestine and who gave so much to Palestine, who will explain to us the importance of a certain rigor in the thought and use of the legal framework of apartheid, as she made it clear to me in 2017. It will be Eyal, who left Israel long ago and feels he has no right to return until he can travel with a Palestinian passport, that is, the passport of a single and democratic state, who will shed light on the complexity of the physical and material conditions that generate genocide. It will be Gabor, marked early by the persecution of the Jews, who will enlighten us on the madness of what is happening to the Palestinian people and on the myth of normality. And then Abu Hassan, who guided us to see the places that reveal their fatigue and oppression; Alon, a great student of genocide and a precious friend, who helped me to understand more closely the contrasts that can dwell in the heart of an Israeli Jew who "sees" the Palestinians and feels their cause as his own, because the liberation of the Palestinian people from the oppression of apartheid holds the key to the liberation of the Israelis themselves; Ghassan, the surgeon who arrived from London to enter the heart of the most unimaginable horror of Gaza in the first months of the genocidal assault; Malak, the young painter who took the opposite path, leaving Gaza to go to London to tell the story of her people in art; and finally, Max, one of the

people closest to me, in life as well as in the search for an awareness that we can translate into action.

Ten people, ten stories that are intertwined with the lives of many others — including me, my family, the clerk of an Irish shop, or the children who came to eat mulberries in front of our house in Jerusalem — asking the questions that today seem too difficult to answer. For example: What are the living conditions of the Palestinian people? What are the consequences of the Israeli occupation? Where is "home" for a refugee? What does it mean to be anti-Semitic in battles for human rights? What are the limits of cruelty in a genocide?

Today we cannot avoid these questions.

And, because of what is happening, new ones still arise. For example: Why continue to write about Palestine in a country like Italy, where it is so necessary and so difficult to ensure a hearing for voices that expose the facts and fully explain their legal ramifications? Despite my institutional role, and although I have never done anything that could make me unpopular with the Italian media, I have been subjected to endless offenses and excluded, with a few rare exceptions, from the national media landscape. So the only answer I can give myself is this: Since the need to talk about it is not going away, on the contrary it is becoming more and more pressing, I choose to take every possible opportunity to do so, including in this book.

By cultivating in this terrible moment the germ of an idea that had been taking root in my mind for years, the idea of writing a book of "Polaroids from Jerusalem," here I also want to tell the story of Palestine as I have experienced it: not as an activist but as a person who at first approached it with cultural curiosity and, later, from a legal perspective.

When I arrived in 2005 at the School of Oriental and African Studies I discovered two fundamental things. The first was that Palestine could — and *should* — be discussed as a legal issue of protracted, institutional, and systemic illegality, and not simply as a political issue with opposing claims. There was much more that remained to be said, and what was unsaid began to feel too tight for me, because it also authorized people who had never set

foot in Palestine to express themselves, often in a superficial way and applying two standards in evaluating the parties involved.

The second discovery was the encounter with law firms influenced by critical race theory: a way of understanding law in a critical and decolonial key, framing it in the historical evolution not necessarily written by the victors but observed from the perspective of the peoples who, until recent times, have been subjected to international law — as it has been formulated above all by Western countries.

In 2010 I went to live in Palestine as an international official, and Max and I stayed there until the end of 2012. Then I continued to work as an academic. It is by virtue of this experience that I received the mandate of UN Special Rapporteur, which I try every day to honor by showing that the key points of law, after all, are and must be understandable to everyone, because they concern each of us. The international law that I deal with as Special Rapporteur consists simply of the set of rules that states give themselves to regulate their relations: rights, duties, reciprocal obligations. Then there are the rights of the people, human rights, which represent our protection, our shields, and, if necessary, our swords.

The desire that motivates me is to be able to articulate and explain the blatant injustice in the daily lives of the Palestinians.

This desire also runs deeply through the pages of this book, which was written in the era of a genocide that has shown the world its brutality and under great pressure. I was convinced that, because of all the absurd pressure brought to bear against me by influential actors, the Human Rights Council would not renew my appointment. And yet the council continues to place its trust in me, and the publication of this book coincides with the beginning of my second term as Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which will allow me to deal again with these issues that are now inextricably intertwined with my own life, now that the present, the future, and even the past of the Palestinian people is more than ever in danger.

In Palestine — after fifty-seven years of military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and seventy-seven years after

the ethnic cleansing that reached its historical peak with the Nakba, the forced exodus of the Palestinians that began with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Israel is now committing genocide with the awareness and approval of the established system of power, the one that has so far kept everyone subjugated with the threat of retaliation.

The United States, under President Trump, has repeatedly tried to intimidate anyone who dares to touch Israel, saying that they will have to "deal with us," a threatening language unbefitting of politics as we have known it until now, but which is entirely consistent with the substance of what Trump himself said when he declared, "Everyone I've spoken to likes the idea that the United States owns *that piece of land*" — referring to the Gaza Strip. In this sentence there is all the violence of an unbridled power that can achieve everything through force, because, like a Caligula of the twenty-first century, he considers himself above the law. In fact, he doesn't even know the law.

Well, the time has come to *deal* with the United States and others: For us "Westerners," especially for us Europeans, this is an opportunity to untie the knots of the colonial past and begin to pay off our debt. It is time to take a stand against the devastation of Gaza and what remains of Palestine, and to fight against an international system based on the use of force in the name of a so-called "peace" that is always evoked for the benefit of a few and always by using words that mystify the reality of what is actually being done, exactly as Orwell prophesied almost a century ago. Today the concept of "doublethink" advocated by the Ministry of Truth that Orwell imagined in *1984* — a fundamental instrument of mind control wielded by the totalitarian regime described in the novel — no longer seems so fanciful, and indeed invites us to open our eyes to see what we are facing.

Even for the most sophisticated doublespeak experts, it is no longer possible to deny the truth about Palestine. In July 2024, the International Court of Justice has found beyond a reasonable doubt that Israel's occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem since 1967 is illegal and must be abandoned totally and unconditionally.

The occupation is illegal because, by its very existence, it prevents the Palestinians from enjoying the right to self-determination: the right of a people to exist and to determine itself, that is, to choose for itself, without foreign control over the territory and the lives of the people who inhabit it. Yet this simple right to exist as a people and to live in freedom is still disputed by some or dangerously confused with the two-state solution. But I do not think that it is necessary to be a jurist to understand that, without the right of self-determination, every other right loses its meaning and becomes a mere exercise in rhetoric.

What is happening in Gaza, and in the other areas of Palestine under illegal Israeli control, including the West Bank and East Jerusalem, is a colonialism of settlement through the execution of planned and methodical destruction. In Gaza this process is already a tangible accomplishment, and destruction affects physical and biological life in all its forms, annihilating everything that exists, including, of course, the human beings who live, or rather lived, there. In the West Bank, Jewish-only settlements are a continuously expanding pervasive presence and the Palestinians are increasingly isolated. There, the Palestinians may not be subject to carpet bombings like those that have devastated a large part of Gaza, but they are the targets of explosives and mechanical demolitions, which along with the violence of the settlers affects houses, schools, entire neighborhoods, including olive groves and beehives. There is no peace in Palestine if you are Palestinian. Security in that land — and not only there, unfortunately — is a one-way proposition; if you are Palestinian, it is invoked only to repress your freedom. To punish you.

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WHILE WE WERE IN BERLIN, Eyal told me that friends in Gaza had confided to him that, faced with the shortage of bread, families in the Deir al-Balah area had organized themselves to protect the few resources available. “We have to put security guards to watch over the bread and flour,” they told him. The Israeli soldiers called the owner of the bakery and ordered him to put an end

to the practice: “If you don’t remove these security guards, we will bomb you, the bakery, and the security guards as well.” What is the point of all this?

Today, it is not uncommon to come across arguments such as: “But Israel doesn’t want to destroy the Palestinians. Israel just wants to eradicate Hamas,” or: “Israel wants to free the hostages. If only Hamas would free them…”

I would like to point out that, first of all, if you go so far as to bomb a bakery, if you manage to kill tens of thousands of children, to mutilate or make orphans of ten times as many, it is evident that such actions are not in line with the stated objective of freeing hostages or eliminating Hamas, however dangerously vague such a purpose may be. After all, it is enough to think about it for a moment: Who is Hamas? Those who fought for Hamas in 2006? Those who worked in the hospitals under its authority? Who are resisting the occupation? Who are opposing genocide?

These kinds of motivations may very well exist in earnest, in the minds of Israeli leaders or of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers, often very young, who carry out their orders. But it is important to understand that they have nothing to do with what, in the identification of the crime of genocide, is called “intent,” or in legal jargon mens rea. The intent to destroy must be understood as a *determination* to destroy. When the destructive idea is conceived and formulated against a group *as such*, whatever the reasons — even if it is an alleged legitimate defense — we are in the category of genocide.

Genocide is a very serious crime, which should not be possible in the present era, given the guarantees and preventive mechanisms that exist in the various legal systems, both national and international. Instead, this is exactly what has been committed by Israel, conceived by its leaders and carried out by its soldiers, with the complicity of too many Western politicians and with the hateful connivance of the mainstream media, which has denied, watered down, and transfigured reality in order not to disturb the dictates of the Israeli embassies and the very powerful networks in support of Israel, “the last frontier of the West.”

The destruction of a group as such, when it is not accidental, not a mere “incident of war,” however brutal it may be, but an intentional act, constitutes genocide. This intentional destruction has been practiced on the body, on the collective life, on the spirit of the Palestinians — on their skin. Gaza has been the theater, certainly the most ferocious. The most horrible.

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I AM AFRAID OF A SOCIETY in which the news coverage of killing, mutilation, torture, rape, hunger, and famine depends on who is the victim and who is the perpetrator. I have asked myself about this many times during my years as Special Rapporteur, in which I have often found myself at the center of discussions on the meaning of “impartiality.”

When human lives are at stake, impartiality becomes a duty that forces us to put ourselves on the side of the law, justice, and victims. Being impartial means having the courage to stand up for what is right, to give a voice to those who have been silenced or are simply ignored, and to fight against the abuses that torment our world.

Impartiality is not about pretending not to have an opinion in the face of atrocities, or about assuming you have to maintain an equidistant position between two opposing parties, even if their positions are structurally and historically unequal and when there is one party that is occupying, plundering, and oppressing while the other is being occupied, plundered, and oppressed, triggering disastrous mechanisms of violence.

How is it that truth has become a lie and a lie the truth?

To this rampant evil, which would like us all to be entangled or simply defeated, we must respond with conscious awareness and action. Knowledge is a fundamental weapon, because knowledge is the best defense against manipulation, exploitation, and deception; and action should flow from it naturally.

So wherein lies the possibility of salvation for all of us, for the Palestinians as well as the Israelis? I can see it, if only in my mind’s eye, but I see it, and I also see the shape of the path that leads us there. In

addition, I know that this vision is truly shared: All of the people who since the beginning of the genocide have recognized in me a hope, a light, a point of reference, have given me a strength that I would never have imagined. Despite lawsuits and death threats, despite the fear that something could backfire on what you hold most dear in the world, fighting for a just cause is a command that some of us are not equipped to disobey.

I strongly believe in the possibility of coming together as a human family, rediscovering the true and profound meaning of solidarity; the Latin term *solidum* expresses precisely the idea of a “one and the same”: something whole, undivided, complete, often in opposition to what is fragmented or broken. And so, as one body, we should be able to come together and resist. Solidarity, in these terms, becomes a “political form of love,” as the American rabbi Alissa Wise sagely observed.

Alone we are as fragile as the wings of a butterfly, but united — solid and supportive — we can create a storm. This is not just fanciful hyperbole; it is a principle of physics that is called the butterfly effect. Every little gesture of ours is a flutter of wings that triggers a chain of consequences, like the gesture of Mary, one of the many cashiers in one of the many shops in an Irish city, who refused to pass through her register the South African grapefruit selected by a customer. How can we believe that her choice could have an impact on the overthrow of apartheid in a country so far away? Yet we must believe it, because history teaches us that this can happen.

It is in the interconnection of the struggles for emancipation and freedom — individual or collective — that we must rediscover our *solidum.* Together, we can tackle any challenge.

So let’s flap our wings, let’s create a storm, or rather, as they say where I come from, let’s make *ammuìna*!

HIND

What is childhood in Palestine?

> Not to be frightened any more. That's the final aim of man.
> — ITALO CALVINO, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*

END OF JANUARY 2024. Hind Rajab is six years old. She is curled up in the backseat of her uncle's car, hunched together with four cousins. As soon as the umpteenth evacuation order arrived in the western area of Gaza, her mother and brothers fled on foot, but since it is raining and cold, her uncles have put her in the car with them.

It is early afternoon; the exploding bombs can be heard even inside the car, which seems to be stuck in a traffic jam. Something is not right. The uncles sense that, they're agitated, talking frenetically. Not far from a gas station near Tel al-Hawa, the car happens onto a barrage of fire from Israeli artillery. Then a surreal cold. Hind looks around: No one is talking, and they are all slumped over. With her hands surely shaking, she takes the phone from between the fingers of her fifteen-year-old cousin Layan, who was hit while she was talking to the relief workers from the Red Crescent. Hind explains that "the others are dead or maybe they're sleeping" and begs for help. "The tank is right next to me. It's moving. Will you come to get me? I'm so afraid."

On the other end of the line, the aide — struggling to control her fear, because she knows the risk that Hind is facing — answers with affection, "*Habibti*" (Honey), and stays on the phone with her so she won't be alone.

After three hours on the phone — the time it took her colleagues from the Red Crescent to coordinate with the Israeli authorities to locate the car

and get permission to rescue the little girl — the aide reassures Hind that two rescuers are on their way to help her. The recording of that heartrending conversation, with the little girl's life hanging by a thread, has been conserved for history and hopefully, one day, for the judges who will punish those responsible for the massacre in which Hind was killed by the Israeli army.

Twelve days later, Hind's lifeless body would be found in the car that was riddled with more than three hundred bullet holes, not far from the ambulance that contained the dead bodies of her rescuers, who had been killed by the Israeli army. The investigation by the British team from Forensic Architecture led by Eyal Weizman, after reconstructing the distances and the dynamics of the gunfire, demonstrated that it is "not plausible" that the Israeli soldiers who shot at the car from the tank could not have seen that the car was occupied by civilians, including the little girls.

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HIND'S STORY has become a symbol of the brutality of the Israeli assault on the population of Gaza in the days following October 7, 2023. But Hind was killed more than three months after October 7th, when Israel had already killed ten thousand children. How is it possible to tolerate all this killing? And how is it possible that still today — as I am completing the revision of this book at the end of August 2025 — when the number of dead children has come to exceed twenty thousand, of whom more than one thousand were less than one year old, that impunity continues to reign and the death machine set in motion by Israel has not been stopped?

The answer lies in decades of narrative manipulation that has distorted the perception of the balance of power between Israelis and Palestinians.

In recent decades, this narrative has led many to believe that the Palestinians are to blame for their situation, that they are an existential threat to Israel. Even the children? Yes, even them, and maybe especially

them, because in the logic of the Israeli assault begun on October 7th, every Palestine life is seen as a potential future danger to the survival of Israel.

Hind's story, as atrocious as it is, is not an unusual one in Palestine. Mohammed Tamimi was two years old when, a few months before October 7, 2023, the Israeli occupation forces — formally known as the Israel Defense Forces — shot him in the head while he was in a car with his father in the occupied West Bank. No one has been held responsible, as usual.

This is childhood in Palestine.

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IN JERUSALEM, next to the garden of the house where my Max and I lived, there was a small hill with a huge, incredible, generous mulberry tree, which bore fruit for months on end. A purple carpet of fallen mulberries always formed under that tree, and children often came to gather them.

Just below the house there was a low stone wall with a piece of metal fencing, which must have been added to the wall years before, temporarily, but had been left in place. The children, by repeatedly slipping under the fence to come and get mulberries, had made their own passageway. One fine day, I saw them and said: "Hi guys, when you want mulberries, if you knock on my door I'll open it, so you don't have to go under the fence." Most of them didn't understand me, because almost none of them spoke English, except for a little boy with dark eyes, whom I had already noticed in the area with his friends and twin sister.

"Hi," I repeated then, addressing him directly. "I know you are from this neighborhood, I have seen you playing a lot of times. When you want mulberries, don't worry, just call us, so you don't risk hurting yourselves by slipping under the fence."

His answer, respectful but firm, left me stunned.

"No, thank you," he told me. "There's no need to leave the gate open for us. We will continue to take them like this, slipping under the fence, as we have always done."

At eleven, little Mohammed already seemed very assertive to me. His family had been one of the first in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood to have their house expropriated by Israeli settlers — armed civilians who populate the colonies ("settlements" in common parlance)[*] in the West Bank and East Jerusalem with the support of the army. Rifqa, the grandmother of Mohammed and his twin sister, Muna, had taken refuge there in 1948 after being driven out of Haifa (now in Israel). At the end of a long legal battle, in 2009 the main complex of their property was occupied by Israeli settlers, while the El-Kurd family had to build, in the garden, an extension of the house where all the family members were forced to live.

Mohammed's reaction surprised me, because it is not obvious that a child of eleven — or seven, twelve, fourteen — has that kind of awareness of their rights, of their space, their identity. But for the Palestinians who have grown up under occupation, as well as for the millions of them born in the refugee camps scattered throughout Palestine, that's how it is. Generations of people have grown up seeing their land, day after day, continuously pulled out from under their feet like a carpet, fueling an endless struggle for housing, for dignity, for everything that should be taken for granted in childhood. Palestinians have their childhood stripped away from them, they become adults with the bodies of children already burdened by worries, anxieties, fears, responsibilities that should not be part of their lives at that age.

That is why, as UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, I decided in 2023 to dedicate my third report to children, using a word from the English language that vividly describes the Palestinian reality: *unchilding*, or "deprived of childhood." The choice of this theme was rooted in the hope that showing what life was really like for a child in Palestine, along with statistical and legal information, could help the public better understand the gravity of the situation.

When I conducted my research, everything was different from today: The report was presented two weeks after October 7, 2023, but it had been finished two weeks earlier. The situation was already terrible.

At that point in the autumn, the figures for Palestinian children killed by Israel in fifteen years (from 2008 to September 2023) were brutal: more than one thousand four hundred. Each of them, a small universe erased forever. From October 7, 2023 to March 2025, these already gruesome numbers have increased tenfold.

In Gaza, in August 2024, Mohammed Abu al-Qumsan was requesting birth certificates for his three-day-old twins, when he received a call: Your apartment has been bombed, your children and your wife are in the hospital. There was nothing that could be done for them. Dead before even opening their eyes to life.

This is childhood, in Palestine.

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IN 2023, not having received the necessary authorizations from the Israeli government to conduct my research in the Occupied Palestinian Territory in preparation of the report for the UN General Assembly of that autumn, I decided to take an alternative approach. With the support of Palestinian civil society and other collaborators, we created focus groups that allowed me to interview Palestinian children online.

At the time, I was on vacation with my family in Sicily, with my children's grandparents (my in-laws). Every afternoon, after having lunch with my children and taking a quick dip in the sea, I got ready to go up to the beach-club terrace, where, with my computer plugged into one of the few available power sockets, I began the meetings that lasted for several hours.

The groups of children and adolescents interviewed soon proved to be well structured and disciplined. Divided by age and geographical location, both my young interlocutors and their parents and companions were enthusiastic to have the opportunity to share their experiences and accounts with me. Gathered around a table, or sitting on chairs sometimes taller than they were (as for the children in Jenin), they were all very attentive in front of the screen. Somebody translated, even though, especially in Gaza, most

of the children spoke English well and so I could interact directly, without the need for mediation.

Those encounters put me in front of an authentic miracle of life, vitality, and tenderness, a setting in which energy and hope seemed to persist despite adversity. In the midst of all the difficulties of the permanent occupation, of the incessant wars in Gaza, where the de facto state of siege made everyone prisoners of a ghetto, along with the devastating proximity of Israeli colonies in the West Bank, and constant attacks by soldiers and settlers, the children I met that summer demonstrated an extraordinary ability to preserve fundamental values. Above all, their love for school. And then their manners and care for their appearance, especially in front of strangers. The boys wore elegant shirts for the occasion with their hair well combed and stiffened with gel, and the girls were in colorful dresses, their long hair gathered in a scarf or hanging free down to their shoulders; their voices spoke to me of a great thirst for knowledge and a burning desire for the future.

This, too, is childhood in Palestine.

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ONE ASPECT THAT STRUCK ME DEEPLY, especially in the beginning, taught me something about myself and the prejudices that we sometimes involuntarily carry with us: The children were extremely prepared when it came to less personal and more general topics. Whether they were talking about problems related to water supply, education, or freedom of movement, they talked about the violations they suffered with a language so precise and assertive that it seemed almost artificial, constructed. “They sound like little lawyers,” I thought. But I soon realized that there was nothing strange about their ability to argue and interact. “They are not my children, who go to school, play, and lead a protected and cushioned life,” I told myself, realizing that those kids were used to hurtful and scary experiences, so it was understandable that for them talking about human rights could turn into a cry for life, an impassioned demand for answers.

How is it possible that this is happening to us, when on paper so many rights should be guaranteed for everyone? It is a question that resonates strongly among Palestinian children, a call to a justice that often seems to be unreachable. While my eight-year-old son has to worry only about memorizing the multiplication tables, the children of Palestine learn and speak the language of law to express their claim to their lives, their humanity. So, paradoxically, it was precisely because they had to defend their right to exist, to be children, that at times they became their own advocates, carrying an incredible burden on their shoulders.

An ancient burden, which has been borne by their society for generations: It is for this reason, I believe, that in their innocence they also demonstrated such a deep-seated awareness of injustice. It takes superhuman courage for a child to face the awareness of oppression: that state of permanent war, being separated from all the other Palestinians in the world, not being able to travel, or even dream about the simplest things in life.

For me, on those Sicilian summer days it was paradoxical to move a few meters from the world around me — a world in which my most important questions were “Have the children eaten?,” “What have they been doing?,” “Who is fighting with whom?,” “Who has eaten two ice creams behind my back?”—to spend every afternoon with the children of Gaza City, Khan Yunis, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nablus, Ramallah, or Masafer Yatta, and let myself be absorbed in another, completely different dimension.

On some rare occasions it also happened that my son, Giordano, who was six years old at the time, with the spontaneity typical of his age, would come over to see who I was talking to, unmindful of being in a bathing suit. I remember that one day a child asked me: “Why isn’t he dressed?”

“Because we are at the seaside,” I replied. But that day I was talking with children who had never been to the sea, who had been trapped in the West Bank since they were born. We had many more meetings with children living in the West Bank than with those in the Gaza Strip, because the logistics were more difficult in Gaza: It was difficult, for example, to

organize buses to pick them up or have them accompanied by their parents, often because of the hundreds of checkpoints, fixed and mobile, created by the Israeli army to “monitor” the movements of Gazans. We had to organize many different dates, each with groups of only four or five children whose members often changed from time to time. They would be waiting for me, sitting composed, excited, and prepared with what they wanted to tell me. I let them speak. I had already collected data on wars, attacks, the destruction of houses, hospitals, schools, evictions, killings, arrests, and so I wanted them above all to talk about their lives: their homes, their games, their travels, their families, so that the report I was drawing up would be “theirs,” and speak, as much as possible, in their voices.

The focus groups never lasted less than a couple of hours; toward the end, after we had gotten to know each other for a while, I felt ready to ask, “Is there anything that scares you?” Inevitably, everyone talked about death. The greatest fear of these children was of dying or losing their parents. Second on the list, being arrested; third, “that they’ll knock down my house.” These are the most frequent fears of Palestinian children. This is how they grow up. That alone seems to me to be an unfathomable brutality.

“We have to fight for the right to breathe, to stay here, to stay in our land without having to suffer every day,” said Rawan, eleven years old. And Aladdin, fourteen: “We always have to run away from some danger, if it’s not the soldiers, it’s the settlers.”

In the descriptions of the children and young people I spoke to, I heard an infinite number of stories where violence and fear were expressed in myriad ways: the violence of checkpoints, the loss of Dad’s job, being slapped, beaten, stripped naked in public, the threats of someone taking your land or forcing your parents to humiliate themselves, the suffering for the lack of parents at home, because, if they are arrested or killed, then you have to grow up with some relative, near or far, who certainly loves you, but is neither Mom nor Dad.

That’s what Palestinian children’s daily lives were like, even before October 7, 2023. “They were bombing us from all sides, they were everywhere, we were very afraid that our parents could die,” Yasmine,

sixteen, told me, who at that point had already experienced five wars in Gaza. And this is the story of Samer, eleven years old: “My father was killed near a settlement by soldiers. They said he was violent…Not only did I lose the most important person in my life but they also came to take our house. First I became an orphan, then they left me homeless.” Fares, age twelve, said: “Last year the soldiers attacked my school three or four times. They launched tear gas canisters and fired live ammunition. Many of the teachers and my classmates couldn’t breathe.”

This is childhood in Palestine.

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UNFORTUNATELY, this is not the only thing that steals the childhood of Palestinian children. The violence of which they are witnesses as well as victims is not only brutally sudden but also — just as brutally — *systemic*: something that makes its way into the daily life of every person and outlines its contours. When I wrote the report on children, we also counted the children who were injured and maimed for life; the children of parents who died, were injured, or maimed; and all the people, including adults and children, who were traumatized. These numbers take your breath away, but at the same time they mean nothing, so much so that the Palestinians have been rebelling for years against the risk of trivializing statistics: An organization of young writers founded in Gaza by the academic and poet Refaat Alareer is called We Are Not Numbers. This organization was constituted in opposition to the destruction of the culture, image, and hopes of the Palestinians of Gaza, threatened by the permanent occupation. By the permanent conflict.

It is the entire way of life of the Palestinians — especially the youngest — that seems to be on the precipice, ready to be destroyed. Take, for example, their existential spaces.

For all children, the home should be the center of their childhood, a safe haven where they can grow, explore, and dream; but in Palestine the certainty of protection is not found even within the walls of their homes.

The expropriation and destruction of houses have become a tool of Israeli occupation, so those who grow up in this reality are forced to live with an “unbelonging” imposed from outside. Every apartment building razed to the ground is not just a demolished structure but a piece of life, history, and past erased, and a mortgaged future, which irreparably marks the soul of the youngest. This violence inflicts a deep wound, a loss that transcends materiality, severing bonds, fragmenting communities, and casting the shadow of a precarious existence on the innocence of youth.

Israeli settler colonialism, designed to progressively (and illegally) annex what remains of Palestinian territory, is not limited to this but creates a coercive environment that undermines the possibilities of growth and development. Children and their families are pushed into poverty, as they are denied basic resources such as water and electricity. Spatial segregation and the restrictions imposed by the occupation prevent them from accessing adequate education and medical care, both in Gaza (even before the current attacks) and in the West Bank.

The occupation, therefore, affects every aspect of Palestinian life. In the occupied territory, punitive demolitions and forced evictions leave many families homeless, condemning children to live a childhood marked by anxiety and uncertainty. The isolated Gaza Strip — a veritable open-air prison for sixteen years, before its recent total destruction — and the repeated military attacks have for years destroyed essential infrastructure, forcing millions of people to depend on humanitarian aid. Generations of children have not only witnessed the loss of their homes and land, their family and friends, but have internalized the trauma of seeing their own people constantly humiliated and deprived of a livelihood and dignity.

Today’s Palestinian children, who make up almost half of Gaza’s population, have lived their entire lives under occupation, like their parents before them. A system that for generations has deprived them of fundamental rights such as self-determination, life, security, dignity, and development, transforming every day of their childhood into a struggle not to succumb. These children grow up surrounded by violence, seeing their homes demolished, their schools destroyed, and their land confiscated. The

images of children moving through the rubble of their homes, picking up toys and pieces of books that escaped the bulldozers, or consoling their despairing parents, are etched in my memory.

In that summer of more than two years ago, which now seems so far away, in addition to the focus groups with children, I interviewed adults who were minors at the time of the first and second intifadas and who in the meantime had become parents or even grandparents. One thing that was clear is how much more aggressive the occupation has become. Ahmed, now an actor and educator, told me: “At least, when we were little, at the time of the first intifada, we could go running in the hills. Now there is the wall. There are too many checkpoints. Now we don’t even have the room to run.”

Over the years, the expansion of the Israeli settlements has been constant: from the Oslo Accords in the 1990s to the construction of the wall in the early 2000s, to the continual violent attacks in the West Bank, the space in which the Gazans can live has progressively shrunk and fragmented.

The children have been deprived even of the space to imagine. They are trapped. This made me aware of another crucial element of the occupation: the aesthetics of imprisonment. Growing up under Israeli occupation is like growing up in an open-air prison, made up of checkpoints, control towers, settlements that observe from on high what is left of the territory, armed guards that enforce their version of order at every presumed threat. The violence that is suffered in this space is not only physical but also psychological. I think of the children I have known, and I imagine that many of them will end up leaving their homeland, where there seem to be no horizons anymore, and where their dreams are smothered by the brutality of the occupation.

In this open-air prison the numbers of arrests of Palestinian minors is also chilling: Between 2000 and 2023, more than thirteen thousand minors were detained, arrested, and imprisoned; and since October 2023 there have already been more than three hundred. Arrests are carried out under any pretext, like the case recounted by fourteen-year-old Abir: “A [Palestinian]

boy was walking down the street. The soldiers stopped and searched him, beat him, and finally arrested him because he refused to take off his trousers during the search." Having witnessed myself innumerable similar abuses and harassment of Palestinians by the Israeli army or police, none of that horror was new to me. But it hurts to hear it recounted by someone so young.

When I was organizing the focus groups with Palestinian boys and girls, violence at checkpoints and armed raids night and day by the Israeli army in Palestinian villages were regular events. Israeli soldiers themselves, for example, members of Breaking the Silence — an organization of former Israeli soldiers who publicly denounce the abuses of the Israeli army in the occupied territory — candidly acknowledged that they had orders to invade the villages, sometimes every night for weeks on end, if not months. Their objective was to exhaust the population and to convince them to leave, in the name of "Israeli security."

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TO THIS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE that invades people's homes and threatens their safety and dignity every day, we must add the eruptive violence of wars, pogroms by armed settlers (more and more numerous in the West Bank), and military attacks.

On closer inspection, for all Palestinians, including the younger segments of the population, protection is a chimera: It is not available from institutions or elsewhere. Children grow up with the constant, terrible exposure to violence and the whole of society is afflicted by it. There is a very heavy intergenerational trauma, which I witnessed when I met the young people who had been detained. They were traumatized. Even those who are later given rehabilitative care and are able to improve bear deep emotional wounds forever. Some go back to school, but it's very difficult, because if you get out of prison too early it means that you have squealed, and you are ostracized from your community. If, on the other hand, you

resist for six months, a year, two years, at that point you are a hero. But if you get out, your parents probably had to pay for your release.

It is not normal to grow up in a system like this. When people ask themselves, “Where does the violence come from?,” all they have to do to understand is broaden their vision and put aside their prejudices.

The year 2023 had been very violent: There had been at least seventeen assaults on Palestinian villages by settlers, ending with cars and houses burned, and Palestinians killed. I remember a twelve-year-old boy who lost his sister during a military attack in Jenin in the summer of 2023. The city had been under siege for days, and his sister had been killed in the backyard by the Israeli army. Everyone in the Jenin focus groups had told me about this girl, about the void she had left in the refugee camp where she grew up, in the Freedom Theatre of which she was a part. That theater, which has given itself the name of Freedom, is an institution that allows children in a high-tension area to explore their creativity, to express what they carry inside. “How much pain can such small bodies hold inside?” I thought while that child told me, lucid and composed, the story of his sister killed almost before his eyes.

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LAILA MOHAMMED AYMAN KHATIB was two years old and was having dinner at home with her family when an Israeli soldier shot her in the back of the head. It happened in January 2025. How many newspapers wrote about it? Almost none, because the life (and death) of Palestinians seems to have no place or voice in our (Western) societies.

Furthermore, this is how Israel plants the seeds of hatred among the Palestinians, and it seems incredible to me that this is not understood.

Yet another of the things that deeply struck me on those summer afternoons of 2023 is the strong sense of discipline, resilience, and mutual respect that was felt in the focus groups in Gaza. There were councils for the rights of minors, nongovernmental organizations that had created meeting spaces where children could discuss the situations they were

experiencing, the deprivations they suffered. I remember an exchange between two little girls who were arguing gently. One said: “It’s true that the closure and state of siege are terrible for everyone, but at least you, with leukemia, were able to go to the West Bank and see the mountains! I have never seen the mountains.”

Illness is another of the themes that often emerged in my dialogue with children. In Gaza, for example, even before the genocide, the land was polluted, overpopulated, full of the remains of unexploded ordnance, the water undrinkable. Contamination was everywhere and the number of people suffering from leukemia and cancer, even among minors, was very high. Several reports by the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations have documented tragic situations where children in Gaza, as young as four or five years old, have been forced to travel alone to receive medical care in the West Bank. Their parents did not have permission to accompany them. These restrictions are part of Israel’s broader security measures for the population of Gaza since 2007 and have had a devastating impact on all types of Palestinian mobility. Gaza lacked adequate health care facilities, forcing many families to seek medical care elsewhere. Not only did this practice put children’s safety at risk but it also caused enormous emotional stress to both the young patients and their families, who were forced to separate at times of great vulnerability. But usually the Palestinians are extremely supportive: There was always someone to welcome them, a friend, a relative, a member of a humanitarian organization.

This is childhood in Palestine.

Or rather, it *was,* when the children I spoke to were all still alive and Gaza was teeming with life. Now there is no longer anything that has not been dismembered by the war: from homes to neighborhoods and landscapes, from families to individual lives. The Gaza that those kids were telling me about in 2023 no longer exists and a large part of the West Bank that I knew is being destroyed as I write these pages. Although those who have so far survived the slaughter want to rebuild, what remains is rubble,

and the dust has not yet settled in Gaza. After more than five hundred days of almost uninterrupted bombing, in fact, the bombs continue to rain down.

Right in the middle of the genocide of the Palestinians that began in October 2023, during a conference we held together in London, I heard Dr. Ghassan Abu Sitta recount: “Children are arriving, dead, torn to pieces, seriously injured. I would ask about their medical history and no one knew anything. They were not the children of their rescuers. The parents had been killed.”

This, too, is childhood in Palestine.

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GROWING UP IN PALESTINE means being a child in a climate of constant fear and insecurity, surrounded by the violence of settlers and soldiers.

So I understood that it was not so surprising that the children in my focus groups behaved like adults and claimed their rights even when they spoke to me. I told them: “I’m here to listen to you and I really want my report to the UN to be yours and that everything I report speaks with your voice. I don’t know if it will change anything.” In the end it turned out to be even worse. Much worse than we could have ever feared or imagined.

“But that’s all I can promise.”

Along with everything else, I also remember that summer as the first moment when I felt questioned by my own children: “Why do you spend so much time with the children on the computer and not with us?” I realized how strange it was for them, and I tried to answer, almost certain that I would not be understood, but at least for future memory: “Because, if I were the mother of a child living in a situation like that of those children on the computer, I would really like there to be someone else capable of helping me. And if I were her, I would think that my children, too, those who live in Palestine, have the right to the same things as the children of this other mother: those who are now at the seaside, they walk around all day half naked and, at most, they can be afraid of getting a sea urchin’s

spine in their foot or arguing with a friend about who came in first in the race to the buoy."

It was as if on either side of that computer screen — where on one side there were those sharp and prepared children and on the other those who were enjoying their carefree holidays — I could hear the voices from inside and voices from outside: only some days it became difficult to tell them apart.

A little over a year later I was at home, in Tunis. It was afternoon and outside the window, a few meters from me, I could see Giordano jumping rope and laughing; meanwhile, on my laptop, were images of a mother from Gaza running desperately toward her house, where her son was burning alive.

This is childhood in Palestine.

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THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN should be at the center of any debate on the so-called "Palestinian question," in an effort to guarantee every child the right to grow up protected, in a framework of safety, dignity, and freedom.

Instead, in that situation, it is not only Palestinian children who grow up in a totally unjust system, which constantly exposes them to violence, but Israeli children, too. In the end, they are victims too, because, as the Israeli philologist Nurit Peled-Elhanan argues, being educated from an early age to fear and suspect the Other, to normalize violence, to perpetuate a worldview based on racial domination and oppression, shared by the ideology of their political leaders and often even their own parents, was not a choice.

But children grow up, and the children of today are the adults of tomorrow. If there is one thing that generations of Palestinians can teach us, it is that their people do not bow to the occupation and they resist, as best they can and as best they know how. They did it against the British who were selling off their land in 1936–1939. They did so in the late 1980s, at the outbreak of the first uprising against the occupation (the first intifada), when the killing of four Palestinians in an incident with an Israeli military

truck in the Jabalia refugee camp in the Gaza Strip triggered demonstrations throughout the occupied territory. They did so during the second intifada that broke out in 2000, and which, unlike the first, was marked by lethal violence on the part of the Palestinians. The resistance has continued in a generally peaceful way, but not always. And unfortunately, the more violent and hateful the oppression, the more the force that aims to remove it risks being violent. Like October 7th, an unprecedented horror for Israelis, marked by the sheer ferocity of the attack and the shocking scale of crimes committed against civilians. I have strongly condemned these acts, because while international law recognizes the right to resist oppressive occupation, apartheid, and annexation, it cannot justify targeting civilians.

My choice not to dwell on October 7th here is deliberate, and for two reasons. First, the pain and suffering of Israeli victims, survivors, and their families has been widely documented and continues to be so in the West. By contrast, the suffering of Palestinians — and the structural injustice that underpins it — is often obscured, minimized, or ignored.

Second, the violence of October 7th, even stripped of the grotesque distortions and fabricated atrocities that Western corporate media have added, has been wielded to depict Palestinians as an existential threat to Israel and to justify the widespread and ongoing violence against them wherever they live.

Palestinians have always wanted to lead their own emancipation from occupation and apartheid. This collective determination has taken an increasingly concrete and decisive form over time: for example, during the great protest movement of 2021, after yet another wave of harassment and abuse that had massively targeted Palestinian residents of Jerusalem. At the head of this protest were many young people from Sheikh Jarrah — the neighborhood where I had lived — including twins Mohammed and Muna. When, years later, I had the opportunity to read about them, their faces seemed familiar to me, but in that moment I couldn’t connect them to anything precise; only later, seeing the photos of Mohammed El-Kurd as a child, did I realize that I knew him: He was that little boy who came to play and pick mulberries in front of our house, and who even as a child, with his

rejoinders in perfect English, stood eye to eye with a thirty-year-old foreigner.

Today Mohammed El-Kurd is a journalist, a writer, one of the strongest Palestinian voices in defense of his people. This is one of his verses: “I wasn’t a victim / until the world told me I was.”

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IN PALESTINE, childhood is a story of victims, of fear, of minors stripped of their right to grow up safe and protected, although many parents do their utmost to let their children live a life that is somehow serene and to give them a sense of normality, a bit like Roberto Benigni’s film *Life Is Beautiful*, even within a reality that is not beautiful. A reality where, today, many of the children and young people I met in the course of my personal and professional experience in Palestine are dead. A reality where it can happen that a person’s life is extinguished at the age of six inside a car riddled by hundreds of bullets, as happened to Hind.

Today the Hind Rajab Foundation, an organization that is committed to taking legal action against those responsible for or complicit in war crimes and crimes against humanity in Palestine, is named after her.

This is very important, yet it does not erase death and suffering, and it does not erase fear.

Just as fourteen-year-old Ouadia told me: “Being afraid of death doesn’t stop you from dying; it prevents you from living.”

This is childhood in Palestine.

SKIP NOTES

* While the term “settlement” is commonly used to refer to the cities and towns only for Jewish Israelis, erected in occupied Palestine since 1967, I prefer to call them “colonies,” as in Italian or French. That term defines them more precisely as part of a colonization project, centered around the transfer of the colonizer’s population to the colonized territory, a war crime according to international law.

ABU HASSAN

What are the consequences of the occupation?

Our houses to others
The women widowed
Stones scattered at the entrance of the road.
— CCCP – FEDELI ALLA LINEA, “Palestina”

IN JERUSALEM he is an institution, and he was the first Palestinian that Max and I met upon our arrival in the Holy City. It was at the time of my second interview with the legal department of UNRWA, for a job that would change my life forever. After we moved there, we got together with him regularly. He was a pillar of many of our experiences and choices, yet I do not remember his real name. Everyone has always called him Abu Hassan.

In the Arab world of the Levant, putting Abu or Umm before someone’s proper name is a way of recognizing the passage from adolescence to maturity, generally marked by the arrival of children (and the acquisition of the name of the first son or daughter), since Abu means “father of” and Umm “mother of.” For example, our Arab friends, jokingly, call Max “Abu Leila” and me “Umm Leila.”

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IT WAS IN 2010 that we first set foot in Jerusalem, and Max and I, both curious travelers, took the opportunity to explore the city. Of course, we knew some things about it, but we had no idea what was waiting for us. So much so that the first thing we did was take a classic tour of old Jerusalem

accompanied by Israeli guides, who took us to see the Western Wall, underground Jerusalem, the Silwan district…

I remember that right there, in Silwan, we visited a part of the underground city and at one point one of the guides said to us: “See? On these rocks there are still the signs of the Exodus of the Jewish people!” We were quite doubtful; before leaving home Max had read Israeli historian Shlomo Sand’s *The Invention of the Jewish People,* and that day at lunch we had discussed the possibility that the Israelis would use this kind of narrative about archaeology as part of “their own colonial work,” in an attempt to prove that they were already there two thousand years ago (what was meant at that time by “colonial work” was rather nebulous). The biblical presence of Jewish populations in the land of Israel, that is, more than two thousand years ago, is one of the key arguments used to defend Israel’s right as a Jews-only state, for those who had returned to the land from which they had been driven out some nineteen hundred years earlier. For many people, this somehow justifies the endless occupation and all the other atrocities that have been committed against the Palestinian people every day for decades: “We have come back and now you must all go away, usurpers.”

We were having lunch at the Jerusalem Hotel (another institution that is located on the edge of the Old City), where we were chatting with a person who worked there. We were telling him how surprised we were by the tour we had just taken and that it had seemed like some sort of archaeological propaganda. He appeared unruffled by our frustration and left. A few minutes later, he came back and handed us the business card of Abu Hassan, the owner of Alternative Tours. He told us to contact him, as he would show us Jerusalem under a very different light than what standard Israeli guides do.

Abu Hassan was right around the corner. When he wasn’t working as a guide, he spent most of his time at Mihbash, a café located on the first floor of a historic building, a stone’s throw from the hotel. As soon as we entered, we were greeted by a whiff of fried food and smoke. The place was really kitsch, yet we immediately felt at home: Shortly thereafter, in fact, it would

become our hangout in Jerusalem. We asked for Abu Hassan, introduced ourselves to him, and asked if he had time to take us on a tour in the following days. We arranged to go with him the next day.

To begin with, he took us to places in Jerusalem where families were divided by the wall and children had to crawl through sewage pipes to go to school because of the obstacles put in place by Israel. He gave us the lowdown on the archaeological tours like the one we had taken the day before. Thanks to him we met a priest who had been trained as an archaeologist and who explained to us in detail how much political-ideological manipulation there was behind that kind of historical narrative. Then Abu Hassan took us to see the houses that the settlers had just taken from the Palestinians in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, throwing out those who lived there (including the family of Mohammed El-Kurd), along with most of the furniture and personal property: refrigerators, blankets, clothes, children's notebooks…When we arrived, the Israeli religious settlers who were then living in one of the expropriated houses came out of the house and started throwing things at us, shouting: "Go away! Go away! This is a Jewish home."

At the end of the tour, Abu Hassan took us all to lunch. Obviously at Mihbash.

While we were eating, noticing how upset I was by what we had just seen, he asked me: "But why are you here? Are you tourists?"

"I came for a job interview," I replied. "I'm hoping to move to Jerusalem to work with UNRWA."

He immediately thundered: "Those vultures from the UN! It was better here without you, because you don't do anything, your presence makes no difference, the only thing that's happened since you've been here is that life has become more expensive for everyone."

Feeling stung to the core, I reacted badly: "It's not true! Because if they decide to take me for this job, someone who deals with human rights, it means that the organization wants to give them much more attention!"

I will never forget that my words provoked almost no reaction; all he did was look me straight in the eye and ask: "But *you*, what do *you* want to

do?”

A question which, after so many years, I am perhaps still trying to answer.

Within a few weeks, in fact, I was offered the position I had interviewed for, and so Max and I returned to Jerusalem, this time on a permanent basis. Immediately we went to Mihbash to look for Abu Hassan, who was there as always. Whether it’s summer or winter, unless it’s raining or snowing, the first thing you see when you arrive at Mihbash is his silhouette from behind, smoking *shisha* while looking at the Old City.

Since that day we have done many other tours with him, and sent our visiting friends too. We have come to know him and through him we have understood so much about Palestinian culture. Abu Hassan had a privilege: As a Jerusalemite, he could move freely in both Palestine and Israel. The Palestinians, in fact, are divided according to four different legal identities: those with Israeli citizenship living in Israel (also known as Israeli Arabs, a nomenclature hated by the Palestinians, who prefer “Palestinians of ‘48”); residents of East Jerusalem, who are permanent residents but without Israeli citizenship; Palestinians in the West Bank; and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip — the last two groups generally hold identity cards, formally issued by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) but de facto controlled by Israel, which regulates their issuance, renewal, and revocation, thus determining the holders’ rights to move, which is largely confined to the respective Gaza or West Bank enclaves for these groups, as well as the right to work and to access services. Each group has different rights, especially in terms of travel, access to services, and legal status and the status of Jerusalemites differs from that of residents in Gaza, the West Bank, or Israel. According to Amnesty International, “Under Israeli law, Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem are not Israeli citizens or residents of the West Bank. Instead, they receive precarious permanent residency status, which allows them to reside and work in the city, to benefit from social services provided by Israel’s National Insurance Institute and National Health Insurance, and to vote in municipal elections, but not in national elections.”

It was with Abu Hassan that — having passed yet another Israeli checkpoint — we made our first visit to Hebron. That day he explained to us how the city was divided into two with one part, called H1, formally governed by the PNA, while the other, H2, is under Israeli military control, with some areas of the Old City made inaccessible to the Palestinians. More than thirty thousand Palestinians live in H2, compared to the seven hundred Jewish settlers who have exclusive access to an area of the center. The trip to Hebron was part of a "consciousness-raising" tour whose first stop was the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs, a religious building, originally a mosque, that Israel had divided in two following a terrorist attack decades earlier.

In 1994 an Israeli American settler, Baruch Goldstein, entered that holy site in military uniform, armed with a machine gun, and exterminated twenty-nine Palestinians who were praying, wounding a hundred. At last, someone managed to stop him and he was overpowered and killed, but in addition to the carnage caused by his intrusion, this event sparked an uprising in the city: More than twenty Palestinians and four Israelis died in clashes with the Israeli army. Yet, the Israelis do not consider that a massacre, or more simply they don't remember it. Following the events, Israel closed off Al-Shuhada Street (which means "the street of the martyrs"), the main commercial road leading to the mosque, and carved out part of the mosque to establish a synagogue. As a result, Muslims (who can access the mosque only through a checkpoint for pedestrians) and Jews pray separately to the god of the same figure: Ibrahim for Muslims, Abraham for Jews.

Goldstein was given a solemn funeral and his tomb in the occupied West Bank is still a destination for pilgrims. In the decades since the beginning of the Israeli occupation, there have been many horrors like this for the Palestinians, but many people do not want to acknowledge them, as though they refuse to understand.

In Hebron there is also one of the last factories of keffiyehs still in operation: There are many beautiful ones, handwoven. Historically it was a

city of merchants, also famous for ceramics and blown glass; today it has fallen in on itself, beaten down and exhausted.

Shuhada Street, once crowded and full of life, remains sealed off to this day. Palestinians can live there but not walk there. The doors of houses and shops have been walled up by the army, so many residents have built bridges to be able to pass from one house to another. You see scenes resembling the theater of the absurd: children, late for school, climbing over gates, being chased and reprimanded or beaten by soldiers.

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ANOTHER TRIP WE TOOK with Abu Hassan was to Nablus in the northern West Bank. All Palestinian cities have a medina, the historic center enclosed by walls, but Nablus is unique because it is surrounded by mountains. It is very green and is famous for olive oil, which is also used to produce soap, and for knafeh, a traditional Palestinian dessert as well-known as it is delicious. “The one they make in Nablus is a magical thing,” several friends in Jerusalem had told me. And they were right. Knafeh is made with soft, sweet goat cheese, covered with kataifi pastry, a sort of phyllo in very long filaments, and drizzled with hot honey or syrup, rose or orange blossom water, cooked in huge round pans, then cut into diamonds or triangles and eaten within an hour of being baked, accompanied by tea. Even just seeing it prepared is an experience. In Nablus, we also had the opportunity to meet various people and talk with them to understand better, and more intimately, the reality of the place. For example, we met some former political prisoners who had been arrested only for protesting against soldiers, demanding freedom for their people, or participating in so-called “political activities.”

They were the ones who told us that the mayor of Nablus at the time, Adly Yaish, belonged to Hamas: an Islamic nationalist movement born in the 1980s from the political tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood during the first intifada. Over the years, Hamas has been both a form of armed resistance against the Israeli occupation and the apartheid system —

through the al-Qassam Brigades, which are responsible for numerous tragic attacks against Israeli civilians and soldiers, culminating on October 7, 2023 — and a political party. In 2006, Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections, overcoming Fatah, the rival party founded in the late 1950s by Yasser Arafat and other Palestinian exiles. After the election result was disavowed by the international community, violent clashes broke out between Hamas and Fatah, at the height of which, in 2007, Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, which it still maintains today despite the rampant destruction, while Fatah governs the West Bank.

Abu Hassan also accompanied us on our first visit to the refugee camps of Balata and Jenin, in the northern West Bank, even before I went there for my work with the UNRWA. After the Palestinians were driven from their homes in 1948 by Jewish militias who later merged into the army of the newly formed State of Israel, Balata and Jenin became the largest refugee camps in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Some of the displaced people from Galilee or the coast of Haifa moved to Lebanon, but many people settled in Balata and Jenin, waiting for the day when they could return home. The first generation lived mostly in tents, waiting for the fateful return. The second generation, on the other hand, was that of the resistance, of the fighters — the first to understand that no one would help them. Neither the neighboring Arab states nor the United Nations would ever pull them out of the camps, much less out of the grip of the occupation. The camps then became the cradle of armed resistance in the West Bank.

Palestinian resistance goes back to the time of the British Mandate. The resistance against Israel began in the late 1950s, when various movements were born, such as Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which then associated or federated into the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), becoming the core of the armed resistance. All these groups were strongly rooted in the refugee camps, which is why Balata and Jenin are among the areas ritually attacked by the Israeli army. We were able to see all this from the inside because the Jenin refugee camp still existed, although much of it had been destroyed by the Israeli army during the second intifada, and then,

with great sacrifices, rebuilt. Since January 2025, the camp has been heavily struck by Israeli bombing, and in only a few weeks about twenty thousand people were left homeless.

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WE TALKED AT LENGTH with Abu Hassan about Palestine pre- and post-1948, bonding more closely with him over time. Our friendship was a process of symbiosis: He entered our lives, and we entered his, respecting each other, but also accepting that there were things that we instinctively did not understand at first. Abu Hassan, in fact, did not only take me to see the colonies in the West Bank; he accompanied me around the city of Jerusalem and helped me to distinguish which products came from the Israeli colonies and which didn't, what was better to buy in supermarkets to support the Palestinians and what not to buy at all. After a year, I had a fairly precise idea of who were the ordinary traders and who were the "collaborators," that is, those who did business with the Israeli occupation, which imposed the sale of products from the colonies by prohibiting the entry into Jerusalem of Palestinian goods produced in the West Bank. (As for products from Gaza, forget about it!)

When we moved to Jerusalem, Abu Hassan was one of the friends we consulted to find out which of the houses that were offered to us for rent had been taken from the Palestinians in 1948, so that we could avoid them.

In addition to the tours he took us on in the early days of our stay in Palestine, we always ran into him at Mihbash and wondered if the place was his. We would later discover, over the years, that it was not his, but it was practically a second home for him.

We were always happy to go there, and bring all our friends too, even though the food was nothing to write home about and the young people who waited tables did not seem particularly cut out for that work. It took me a while to understand that, if they sometimes behaved inhospitably, there was a reason — indeed, more than one. Not only did some of those young people come from traditional cultural backgrounds only to find themselves

serving alcohol to or having to smile at people who were there, in their land, without truly understanding it or respecting it, but, on top of that, many of them came from terrible situations and had experienced great traumas that they still carried on their shoulders. In fact, the people who worked as cooks or waiters at Mihbash were generally not professionals but young people who came from difficult lives for whom that place offered their only opportunity.

Many Palestinians, often in the fragile age of childhood and adolescence, experience detention in Israeli prisons. Between 1967 and 2006, more than eight hundred thousand Palestinians, including children, were arrested and detained by Israel, and, obviously, job opportunities for those released from an Israeli prison are hard to come by. So Abu Hassan helped some of these young people find work in what was now his headquarters. This is one of the reasons for the dark clouds that accompanied some of the waiters at Mihbash.

For me, Max, and our closest friends and colleagues, the place was a refuge, and we were happy to adopt it as our hangout, because we also considered it a very practical way to make our small contribution to the difficult life of the Palestinians in East Jerusalem. It didn't matter that the service was not up to Michelin Guide standards or that the place smelled of fried food mixed with *shisha*, which was the argument sometimes used by our friends to get us to go elsewhere: "Why do we always have to go to that place where when we come out our clothes stink?" But, in the end, one way or another, Max always managed to win them over.

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AMONG THE VARIOUS TOPICS of our endless conversations, one of the most frequent was undoubtedly detention. Later on, when I was preparing to write my second report to the United Nations—"Arbitrary Deprivation of Liberty in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: The Palestinian Experience Behind and Beyond Bars" — I had the opportunity to do much more in-depth research on the subject, from which gruesome information emerged.

In that report, presented to the Human Rights Council in July 2023, I defined the arbitrary and systematic deprivation of liberty as carcerality: a system of large-scale confinement that stifles every aspect of Palestinian life. As Israel had refused to grant me access to Palestine, for more than six months I conducted my investigation remotely to prepare the report, which revealed that this control is effected on three levels: physical (through checkpoints, walls, and the blockade of Gaza, transforming the whole area into an open prison), bureaucratic (with a system of restrictions that regulates and limits every movement), and digital (thanks to surveillance technologies that monitor the population constantly).

People are often jailed without charges or due process, and the Israeli judicial system, which applies the civil law to settlers in the colonies in the West Bank, applies military law to the Palestinians in the same area. Not to mention the absurd and degrading conditions to which children and young people are subjected, the special forms of violence and blackmail suffered by women and the LGBTQ+ community, or the widespread use of torture in prisons. This is the state of things: practices that are manifestly contrary to respect for human rights, and which should therefore be prosecuted as war crimes and crimes against humanity. A legal system that treats an entire population as a collective threat can have no legitimacy.

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IN ADDITION TO the numbers of Palestinians arrested — frightening figures because, under any conditions, arrest and imprisonment mark you forever — my investigation focused on the terrible reality of Israel’s detention of minors.

The arrest of children is instrumental to repression and is one of the weapons that Israel uses to persecute the Palestinians and deprive them of their fundamental rights. Persecution, that is, the “intentional and serious” deprivation of fundamental rights by virtue of one’s group identity, constitutes an international crime, recognized by the Rome Statute that

established the International Criminal Court, which is responsible for crimes against humanity, war crimes, crimes of aggression, and genocide.

For a child, being arrested on charges such as throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, army vehicles, or settlers, and then being harassed and forced to provide information about the people of his city or neighborhood, is an experience that will mark him or her forever, triggering a series of life-changing consequences. First, exposure to such violence, moreover without the assistance of a parent or lawyer, leaves children alone and vulnerable: abused, threatened, slapped, beaten, deprived of the opportunity to defend themselves. They are often chained by their hands and feet to chairs for long periods of time, they feel pain, they cannot go to the bathroom, they defecate or urinate on themselves and are ridiculed for it.

It has happened several times that children have been put in isolation for more than two weeks. But UN standards on the treatment of prisoners indicate that solitary confinement for more than fifteen days is to be considered a form of torture and is expressly prohibited for adults, let alone minors. Children should not be imprisoned; prisons are not a place for them, especially military prisons, which is where Palestinian prisoners generally end up. Over the years, various international organizations have recommended that the Israeli military detention system must respect the rights of childhood. But in hindsight that was a mistake. They should simply have insisted that children not be arrested by soldiers, not be accused of vague crimes established by military orders of a vexatious nature, and not be tried by military courts. Instead an attempt was made to make the occupation more “acceptable.” But how could an occupation organized as a permanent instrument of oppression ever be considered acceptable?

Over the years I have attended several trials against minors, and I have seen with my own eyes their absurd brutality. The children were brought into the courtroom in chains, and I felt like I was watching scenes of slaves in labor camps. Small, emaciated, exhausted, anxious at the thought that, for the first time since their arrest, they would be seeing their parents again, in these hearings that lasted no more than a few minutes. The judge often

did not even look at them; he heard the charge — “He was throwing stones” — and handed down the sentence. Two years in prison. Three years in prison. And so on. Lighter than usual sentences in these cases, given that the punishment for Palestinians who throw stones is up to ten years (twenty if done with the intention of harming someone).

After such a nightmare, how can anyone be surprised that when jailed Palestinian children return home they are traumatized, do not want to go out, are afraid, wet the bed, and exhibit disturbances or violent behavior? We are talking about twelve-, thirteen-, fourteen-year-old kids, but even younger kids are arrested. There were children as young as five or six being taken away by Israeli trucks; perhaps not detained but interrogated and then sent home (all you have to do is search the Internet to learn about this). The consequences are dramatic, and the message is very clear: “You are under our control. You are not free.”

How can one speak of *conflict*, as a synonym for war, to describe such a situation?

Conflict requires two vaguely comparable sides. Israel and Palestine are not comparable antagonists: one is the occupier and the other the occupied, one is the colonizer and the other the colonized, placed in a condition of structural subordination and the victim of a system of control and segregation. No, this is not a conflict, at most it can be seen as an inhuman relationship with one side oppressing the other.

Furthermore, the oppression of the Palestinian people by the Israeli occupation is aggravated paradoxically by the role of the PNA, a political institution created in 1993 following the Oslo Accords.

These agreements, cosigned by Israel and the PLO, were supposed to mark the first mutual recognition between the two parties and establish a path toward the creation of a Palestinian state. For the Palestinians, however, they have not produced any concrete results, except for the strengthening of the matrix of control that has made the occupation even more rapacious in the acquisition of land and the repression of Palestinian life. The promised state has been formally established and exists (it has even been recognized by a hundred and thirty-five countries of the United

Nations), but in practice it has never materialized: The Israeli occupation has continued, expanding geographically, and the colonies in the occupied territory have multiplied, aggravating the oppression.

But even if the Oslo Accords had been respected, they were still based on a marked asymmetry of power between the parties, which would allow Israel to maintain effective control of the territory, leaving the Palestinians only fragmented autonomy devoid of real sovereignty. This has been stated by many scholars, both Palestinian and Israeli, such as Edward Said, Tanya Reinhart, and Ilan Pappé, as well as American scholars such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, or even by reports by organizations such as the Israeli B'Tselem. Although the Oslo negotiations marked an important symbolic turning point, they did not question the architecture of Israeli control. That is why many believe that it was precisely these agreements that legitimized the occupation, transforming the PNA into an administrative body that governs the Palestinian population in some areas but remains under Israeli military surveillance and domination. In fact, apart from exercising full civilian and security control in the major Palestinian cities (the so-called Area A) and civilian control in the peri-urban areas of the occupied territory (Area B), the main role of the PNA, according to the Oslo Accords, is to maintain security coordination with Israel, which is free to raid Area A cities too. But whose security? The answer is obvious.

Many Palestinians see the PNA as an obstacle to achieving self-determination. Unfortunately, this aggravates the social and political fragmentation of the Palestinians.

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TODAY MORE THAN EVER, a Palestinian does not have many alternatives for the future. In the exercise of the basic functions of life, clashing with Israelis is inevitable, and it is not uncommon for Palestinians to be imprisoned or killed. Involvement in politics also leads to the same outcome.

There are figures such as Khalida Jarrar, a member of parliament duly elected in 2006 as a member of the Palestinian National Council, who finds herself continually under arrest for security reasons. In 2021, while she was in prison without charges and without a trial, Israel did not release her even for the funeral of her daughter, Suha, who died very young of a heart attack.

Detention by the Israeli army makes many Palestinians political prisoners: They are not arrested for common crimes, but the charge, when issued, is very often related to the political situation. There has always been a natural solidarity between society and political prisoners who are seen in some way as fighters. Helping each other and supporting the families of those in prison was a priority initially for the PLO, as it has been since for the PNA. At least until February 2025, when, under pressure from the United States, the PNA suspended support for Palestinian prisoners and their families. This has deprived many people of essential help, as often it is the heads of families who are arrested, leaving the entire family without resources. That's why Abu Hassan was so keen to get those guys a job at Mihbash.

It is true that resistance can be violent, and civilians must always be protected from violence. I am not here to justify any crimes that the Palestinians may have committed against Israeli civilians in the long course of their oppression. But I am reminded of a reflection by Bertolt Brecht that I find extremely fitting in this case, as well as in other situations of systemic and protracted oppression:

The rushing river they call violent
But the riverbed pressing it in
Nobody calls violent.

The time has come to solve violence by going to its roots, removing the causes that trigger it, which in the Occupied Palestinian Territory are essentially the oppression and apartheid of the colonial project.

GEORGE

What does it mean to live in Jerusalem?

> All in all, it’s just another brick in the wall.
> All in all, you’re just another brick in the wall.
> — PINK FLOYD, “Another Brick in the Wall, Part 2”

JERUSALEM FOR ME is an utterly religious but not very spiritual city. Indeed, I have often had the impression that it is precisely there that one breathes the religion that stifles the spirit, despite the fact that so many people — including Jews, Muslims, and Christians — feel it is the fulcrum of their faith.

Geographically it is a city like many others. Politically, however, it is divided in two and, if you know it well, is a shattered city, starting from Road Number One, which crosses it from north to south, marking the dividing line between the predominantly Arab areas to the east and the Jewish areas to the west. Today, the road is urbanized and incorporated into the city fabric (to the east, it passes near the Damascus Gate, Sheikh Jarrah, Musrara), but it was once an important physical, political, and cultural boundary line drawn by the 1948 war, and retains a strong symbolic and historical value.

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IN 1947, the United Nations General Assembly approved the so-called Partition Plan for Palestine, which provided for the division of Palestine into two states, assigning about 55 percent of the territories to the future

Jewish state (although Jews were less than 35 percent of the population and owners of only 6 percent of the land) and the remaining 45 percent to the Palestinians, who individually or collectively owned 94 percent of the land at that time.

The plan was rejected by Palestinian leaders and Arab countries, who considered it unjust, and this led to a civil war, which then resulted in the 1948 conflict with the neighboring Arab countries after the proclamation of the State of Israel.

The battles between the Zionist militias and the Palestinian and Arab forces focused on strategic points, including the road that connected Tel Aviv (at the time a settlement of Eastern European Jews who had come to escape persecution) and Jerusalem: the future Road Number One. During the conflict that broke out in May 1948, in what the United Nations had indicated as the territory of the Jewish state, one of the crucial nodes was the area around the city of Latrun, the scene of violent clashes between Israeli troops and the Arab Legion, which intervened at that point from Jordan.

After the armistice of 1949, the Green Line of ceasefire was drawn in that area, and in some places Road Number One still follows it today, continuing to mark the separation between the Palestinian neighborhood Sheikh Jarrah and the Orthodox Jewish neighborhood, on the opposite side of Road Number One, in the Israeli area of West Jerusalem.

In the UN partition plan, Jerusalem was envisioned as a *corpus separatum*, a city under international administration, but this has never actually come to pass. Israel had been allocated 55 percent of historic Palestine, but instead grabbed 78 percent by 1949, leaving the “Arab state” imagined by the UN, and opposed by the Arabs themselves, only 22 percent and thus grossly violating the terms of the partition. During this period, clashes between Zionist militias and Palestinian armed resistance and attacks on villages, especially Palestinian ones, led to the expulsion or forced flight of about seven hundred and fifty thousand Palestinians (out of the one million originally inhabiting today’s Israel). This is the so-called

Nakba, the Arabic term for catastrophe, which is still commemorated as such by Palestinians across the globe.

Jerusalem was then divided into two parts: the west, under Israeli control, and the east, under Jordanian control, with the Old City rising just beyond the former Green Line (the other name of Road Number One, from the color with which the armistice line with Jordan was drawn). The historic center is spectacular. Surrounded by ancient walls, it is made up of four quarters: Armenian, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim (or Arab).

Just outside the Old City walls, in the Muslim Quarter, is Salah al-Din Street, where the Educational Bookshop is located, the best-known bookstore in East Jerusalem and a meeting point for foreigners like myself and my husband, and for Palestinians with access to Jerusalem.

On the ground floor of the Educational Bookshop there is the main bookshop itself, which has (or rather *had*, as long as it was permitted to) a large selection of modern and historical books on Israel-Palestine, along with a small café where homemade cakes were served; on the lower floor there is a conference room and a small kitchen; on the mezzanine floor there is a space for sitting and, for some, working. Max — who at that time was working remotely for a British think tank — went there often; it had become his de facto office when we moved to Jerusalem from Geneva. One day, during one of Max's loud online conversations, a character who used to sit on the mezzanine of the bookshop came down the stairs and tapped him on the shoulder: "How on earth am I supposed to work if I can't even hear my own thoughts over your loud voice?" This is how he met George, and this is how their (and our) friendship was born, to the detriment of the other patrons of the café. Thanks to their boisterous voices, they soon came to be known as the quintessential "noise polluters."

George is a Palestinian engineer from Jerusalem, a very intelligent, extremely warm person. He studied in the United States, worked for years in Silicon Valley, and at the beginning of the 2000s, after living there for twenty years, decided to leave everything and return home to help build what he hoped would become the Free State of Palestine, especially its IT sector.

In Palestine, George found it hard to keep a job worthy of his education, especially because of his independence of thought. He had a hard time working with international organizations, where a Palestinian was expected not to speak about occupation and apartheid. The idea was more or less: “If you want to work with us [that is, Westerners with dough], you have to adapt to our style.” But George was a nonconformist, and above all a person of principle, reluctant to concede to the depoliticization of Western *donors.* Moreover, working with the Israelis was even more complicated, because even the most progressive of them always maintained a certain sense of superiority and paternalism over Palestinians, and he could not bear the idea of feeling beholden to the “generosity of others.”

For a Palestinian, living in Jerusalem means dealing daily with the implications of the structural subordination imposed by Israel, starting with the terminology, which we tend to think is clear, even though it is not.

Even the opposition between “Arabs” and “Jews,” for example, can be seen as a reverberation of socialist thought, which tends to simplify this terrible situation of apartheid in ethno-religious terms, obscuring the political, colonial, and national dimensions. Calling the people of Palestine generically “Arabs” — as is often done in Israeli textbooks or in mainstream media around the world — contributes to denying their national identity. Referring to Palestinians simply as “Arabs” risks subscribing to the idea that there is no such thing as a Palestine and that the Palestinians are temporary guests or, indeed, an invention.

It takes a conscious effort for others to appreciate what it means for a Palestinian in Jerusalem to live all day, every day immersed in this tension that touches everything, including the words that appear to be the most banal but which, on closer inspection, are very problematic.

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IN ADDITION TO Abu Hassan, our closest Jerusalemite friends, who left their mark on our lives and helped us navigate the complex space of the city in those early years, were George and Ibrahim: two complementary souls. One

Christian and one Muslim; George always full of energy, a bottle of champagne just uncorked, Ibrahim serious, studious, and often silent. Ibrahim came from the Husseini family, one of the most important in Palestine, descendants of the Prophet and above all of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, a figure strongly discredited by a narrative aimed at delegitimizing his political role in the years of the creation of the State of Israel in Palestine and reducing his figure to the controversial proximity to Nazi Germany, while obscuring his central role in the Palestinian resistance to the British Mandate and to Zionism. At that time Ibrahim lived in a beautiful, airy, spacious house in the center of East Jerusalem. He was a journalist for a Western broadcaster and had to struggle constantly with the need to measure his every word: Telling the truth about the events on the ground involving the Israeli occupation meant risking not being published or, worse, losing or being forced to leave his job, as happens to many.

I don’t know how I could have lived without them and our other friends during those intense years in Jerusalem, when I often felt discouraged. After six months, I was almost ready to leave, because I could not tolerate the heaviness, the oppressive tension, that forced and persistent separation imposed by the always fluid but nonetheless impassable boundaries of apartheid, even if at the time I did not yet use that word.

Every day just crossing the city turned out to be a journey that left me speechless.

I remember that a few days after meeting Ibrahim we went with him to the Western Wall, one of the main holy places of Judaism, venerated as the only surviving part of the wall that once surrounded the Second Temple of Jerusalem, which some say was destroyed by the Romans in the first century AD, while others claim it never existed or did not exist there. Close to the Western Wall is the area of the Esplanade of the Mosques, otherwise known as the Temple Mount, one of the holy places of Islam.

Like many sites in Jerusalem, this place carries with it a history of violence and dispossession. In June 1967, with the military occupation of East Jerusalem by Israeli forces, the Moroccan Quarter, which was right in front of the Western Wall, was placed under the control of the occupation.

Overnight, the entire area of ninety thousand square feet was razed to the ground and about six hundred and fifty inhabitants were evacuated, deprived of their homes to make room for Jewish pilgrims — a part of history that is not told to the thousands of tourists and faithful who visit this sacred place every year. Max, Ibrahim, and I were taking a couple of friends and Max's brother, who were visiting from Italy, for a walk in the Old City that evening, trying to imagine what that place must have been like before the occupation, when we noticed a man who was talking in a rather excited way, like a street vendor trying to attract the attention of the crowd, in front of a small group of people who looked like tourists. The scene intrigued me, because usually no one is so exuberant in Jerusalem, at least none of those I saw daily: not the Palestinians, always with their heads bowed to be noticed as little as possible, nor the ultra-Orthodox Jews who always run through the Arab Quarter to go to pray at the Western Wall, nor the soldiers, posted everywhere to control the lives of the Palestinians. When he realized that I was staring at him, the guy looked at me with a toothy smile and his arms open wide, like Kate Winslet on the bow of the *Titanic*, and then he said to me in a thick Australian accent: "*Welcome to Israel!"*

"Occupied Palestine. It's occupied Palestine, this part here," I told him with a trace of a smile.

He retorted sharply: "Palestine does not exist, this is Israel."

At that point Ibrahim, who was walking next to me, asked him animatedly: "And if Palestine does not exist, what am I?"

"You don't exist," the man replied without batting an eyelash. Years later we would discover that this man was the head of one of the most aggressive settlers' organizations, trying to take over as many Palestinians' homes in Jerusalem as possible. We had just come across, without knowing it, a man who, if we lived in a just world, would have been sent to prison long ago.

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GEORGE AND IBRAHIM were not guides, but hanging out with them meant exploring the Old City with fresh eyes. We often spent hours chatting in the beautiful garden of the Austrian Hospice, a structure dedicated to pilgrims, where many young Austrians worked. Or we went together to Mihbash, where we always ran into Abu Hassan.

In East Jerusalem there were not many places open in the evening, but during the day there were plenty of places to have breakfast. On Saturday mornings Max loved to sleep in, so I, who was more of an early riser, often went with George to Salah al-Din Street, to a small place that was accessed through a narrow staircase. In the basement there was a very simple room, with tiled walls, white plastic tables, black-and-white chairs, an old refrigerator for drinks, and a counter with a fryer where hot food was served. There we had the classic Palestinian breakfast: hummus, hummus basar (served hot, with meat) for George, tomatoes, olives, cucumbers, various types of cheese with olive oil, the inevitable kilo or two of bread to dip in oil and za'atar. I remember that in the last few days I spent in Jerusalem I was in the middle of my first pregnancy and had a craving for spicy foods, so I used to binge on hot chickpea cream that I ate with filfil akhdar, spicy green peppers, instead of bread (which earned me the nickname Ghazaouia among my friends, "woman from Gaza," since these peppers are all the rage there). The owners were terrified that I might feel sick in there and feared a raid by the Israelis because of a pregnant Italian who risked poisoning herself in their restaurant.

Sometimes — often with George, Ibrahim, and Abu Hassan — we went to West Jerusalem in the evening. We went to a place called Toy Bar, one of the rare meeting places for young Israelis and Palestinians in the city, where dance nights sometimes evolved into wild parties with dancing on the tables until dawn. It all happened within a radius of a few streets; not far from the Toy Bar was the Diwan, Arabic for "sofa," a disco bar with DJs and plenty of space to go wild. After all the accumulated tension, dancing was liberating, but I would never have gone to a place where my Palestinian friends may have been harassed and that was a kind of free zone. Moreover, Amir, the Israeli boy posted at the entrance, knew Abu Hassan, and this was

enough to make us as welcome as if we were the pasha with his court in tow.

Of course, there were often Israeli soldiers, but it must be borne in mind that almost all Jewish Israeli citizens have been soldiers at some point. For Jews, but not for the Palestinians living in Israel, conscription is compulsory: three years for boys and two for girls. After those initial years, it is possible to be recalled up to the age of forty, with a few exceptions, which is what has been happening en masse since October 7th. Israelis who refuse to take part in the army, as conscientious objectors, can be imprisoned, even for months.

Then there was Uganda, a place opened by Palestinians in 1948, also in West Jerusalem — and which closed its doors shortly after our departure from Jerusalem. Its name was a provocation: Before the British Mandate (1920–1948), when the possibility of establishing the State of Israel in Palestine materialized, Uganda was one of the places that was proposed — and eventually refused — for the settlement of Zionist Jews and the creation of a Jewish state.

Among the many places we went for walks with George, I will never forget Talbiya and Baka, two contiguous areas in the heart of West Jerusalem where today, among tree-lined avenues and cafés that would seem to belong to any Western city, there are some wonderful houses. Very elegant, unique houses, mixing Arab taste with Ottoman and European influences and built in the 1920s and ‘30s by wealthy Palestinian families. That was the wealthy part of the city pre-1948, where Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived together, before the war separated them and before the arrival of European Zionism.

Most of the houses are made of light stone — the cream-colored stone of Jerusalem that lights up with golden reflections at sunset, hence the nickname “golden city” — with high ceilings and large arched windows often framed by wooden shutters. Many overlook small internal gardens with stone benches and colored-tile floors, now enclosed by modern gates through which a few tufts or rebellious branches of bougainvillea, figs, lemon trees emerge. Some retain their original doors, sturdy, carved by

hand, with brass knockers, and inside there are still ceramic floors of geometric shapes or floral motifs, wall niches, and the vaults and fireplaces chosen by those who had them built. But after 1948 most of these houses were attacked by Zionist militias, the Palestinian inhabitants forced to flee, with the hope of being able to return soon. But no, seventy-seven years later, with the houses still there, returning is not something even to be talked about.

When we were out for a walk one day, George showed us the outside of the house that had been expropriated from his grandmother, so I asked him: "Do you want us to ring the bell and get them to open up, so at least you can see it from the inside?"

But he replied with a curt no: "Let's forget it. I've already tried, and I won't tell you how they treated us. Now they live there, or someone who pays them rent, because often these 'new owners' no longer even live in our houses."

I have heard this same story many times. Palestinians who manage to return to the places of their childhood, recounted to them by way of the memories of their displaced parents or grandparents — the survivors of the Nakba — and, when they arrive, they often find nothing. Sometimes the building has been razed to the ground, other times new structures have taken its place, but what happened to George may hurt even more: coming back and seeing his family's house still standing, trying to enter even just to be able to look at it once and being gruffly turned away by the people who live there, who may not even be the new owners but are tenants. Many of these houses, in fact, are often left empty for long periods, because many Israeli Jews have dual citizenship and live abroad. I knew people who worked for international organizations and had rented from Israelis houses that had belonged to Palestinians who had become refugees in 1948 — something aberrant for me, but which unfortunately does not surprise me too much because the expatriates, a group that also included Max and myself, rather than being ineffable bearers of peace, are often so detached from reality that they do not feel the breath of the land they live on. I noticed that the idea of being there in the guise of the *white savior*

prevented many of my colleagues and friends, especially those who worked for the United Nations, from questioning themselves, and I began to see in their work and in the very fact of living on that earth a part of the problem that we had ideally come to solve.

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ALTHOUGH TALBIYA AND BAKA are objectively beautiful areas, full of nice clubs and restaurants, for me they have always been a place of internal conflict. Because you feel the cultural appropriation very strongly there, starting with the strange fusion between Palestinian cuisine and Eastern European influences. Restaurant menus always feature hummus, baba ghanoush, falafel, olive oil, and za'atar, next to turnip soup, cabbage…Of course, the idea of a fusion, even gastronomic, between Palestinians and Israelis would be interesting, if it did not inevitably bring with it the aftertaste of apartheid, if Israel were not the country that more than any other tries to annihilate the identity of the Palestinians and in the meantime demonizes it. For me, therefore, the cuisine of Talbiya is not cultural fusion but a symbol of the normalization of the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, which is also effected through the misappropriation of what was and continues to be Palestinian culture. Barring a miracle, I fear that it will take decades before we eliminate the sense of privilege and abuse that today permeates everything, including restaurant menus.

That is why I believe that, on the other side of the city, East Jerusalem — an integral part of the West Bank under Israeli military occupation — represents a sort of colonial frontier: a place marked by the constant encounter with and clash between the local Palestinian population (Muslim, Christian Armenian) and the work of Judaization, that is, the progressive imposition of the Jewish Israeli presence, control, and culture that touches all areas of daily life. This is not to deny Jerusalem's strong Jewish heritage; there were many Arab Jews living in pre-Israel Jerusalem. But, as many historians, including Israelis like Menachem Klein, have written, the common life of Jewish Arabs on the one hand and Muslims and Christians

on the other was compromised by the spread of Zionism from the first half of the twentieth century onward. Those wounds have never healed, or at least not yet.

This is where one of the most complex and delicate questions emerges for most people who do not have a thorough knowledge of the history of Palestine. An issue that we have often addressed, in our conversations and walks with our Palestinian friends and, later in life, with Israeli friends: Who are the real *indigenous people* of those places? To say that Palestinians (identified as non-Jews who live, or whose history originates, in that part of the land we call Holy) are genuinely indigenous does not mean that Jews are not.

At the end of the nineteenth century, while the Ottoman Empire was beginning its decline and part of European Zionism was emerging with projects for the creation of a Jewish state, centered on Jewish immigration that would achieve political and cultural control over the local population, historical Palestine was home to a population with a large Muslim majority, and Christian and Jewish minorities: They were all "Arabs of Palestine." Following the persecutions in Eastern Europe and the anti-Semitic discrimination throughout the Continent that led to the horror of the Holocaust, thousands of Jews progressively emigrated to what was first Ottoman territory and then the British Mandate. This represented an important step forward for the Zionist colonial project, whose founding fathers included the Austrian Theodor Herzl, the Russians Chaim Weizmann and Vladimir Zeev Jabotinsky, and the Pole David Ben-Gurion, who in 1948 became the first prime minister of the State of Israel.

The aliyah, meaning "return" and used to describe Jewish immigration to the land of Israel, became central to the Zionist movement as early as the late nineteenth century.

So it is correct to say that there was a pre-Zionist Jewish community in Palestine (equal to less than 10 percent of the population at the time); it is correct to say that most of the Jews who went to Palestine before and immediately after the creation of the State of Israel, especially the survivors of the Holocaust, had few or no alternatives because so many Western

countries were reluctant to accept them, and thousands found themselves without shelter, with communities destroyed and families decimated. It is equally correct to mention that today many of the Israelis living in the colonies in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, occupying the homes and land of the Palestinians, have American, Belgian, French, Australian, Canadian, Argentinean names and accents. Often neither they nor their parents were born in Israel, but they come from cities where they often remain for most of the year: Although they reside abroad, they retain ownership or control of real estate in the occupied territory, contributing to the systematic dispossession of the Palestinians.

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LIVING IN JERUSALEM also means walking down the street and seeing a family's personal belongings piled up on the sidewalk, while someone else is moving into their house as if it were perfectly normal.

There are various ways for Israelis to acquire Palestinian homes. There is nothing wrong with wanting to buy property per se, but the point is that in Jerusalem, it is not simply a matter, as in other places, of an individual who falls in love with a house and decides to buy it but of organizations that pursue a precise political project of Judaization of what remains of Palestine. One of the central figures of this system, as well as one of the most aggressive, is Daniel Lauria, the same person with whom my friend Ibrahim and I had that spat at the Western Wall. Years later, I recognized him in a documentary on the settlers, in which he proudly explains his commitment to "facilitating" the buying and selling of Palestinian homes and land to help the return of the Jews. In the documentary describing the work of Ateret Cohanim, the organization led by Lauria, there is a scene in which Muna El-Kurd, Mohammed's twin sister, tells a settler "You are stealing my house!" and he replies without any shame: "If I don't steal it, someone else is going to steal it." And with people like Lauria on the rise, how can you blame him.

Ateret Cohanim essentially manages to evict Palestinians — often with highly questionable property titles — or to convince them to sell their homes. Some agree to do so out of desperation and, after being ostracized by the community, they sell in secret before fleeing abroad. Others are simply kicked out.

Even when acquisitions are legal, they are still part of an occupation because they make use of vexatious tools. Right above our house in Jerusalem there were settlers, and their presence was always exhibited with security guards, Israeli flags, reproductions of gigantic menorahs poised on the rooftops. Even Ariel Sharon had bought a house in East Jerusalem, and it was not in a side street but in a clearly visible spot in the Old City, a clearing near the Damascus Gate that I used to pass by regularly on my way to the Austrian Hospice and where more than once I saw brutal searches and beatings of young Palestinians by Israeli soldiers. It was essential that that house be located in a place of passage, precisely because it was meant to be a symbolic building. This also contributes to the tense atmosphere in Jerusalem. When you cross the Arab Quarter of the Old City to go to the Western Wall or the Esplanade of the Mosques and you look up to the sky, you see many Israeli flags and Jewish symbols in houses that until recently had been inhabited by Palestinians. For a Palestinian, the possibility of returning home and finding settlers inside, as has happened to so many, is a source of permanent anguish.

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BEYOND JERUSALEM'S MANY CHARMS — the busy life of its alleyways crowded with shops and the faithful on their way to pray, the magic that embraces you when you look at it from atop its massive walls, a roof, or a terrace during the Islamic hour of prayer when captivating chants flow out from all the minarets — it has always conveyed a sense of melancholy to me. Both when I lived there and all the times I've gone back, I was happy to be there, yet at the same time I felt an emptiness, an inner cold. Every time I set foot there it felt like a deeper plunge. Despite being a vibrant city,

it is as if something has been snatched from it and will never come back. The Palestinian population of the city is especially distressed.

Jerusalem has always been an important center for the life of the Palestinian people; not only for religious reasons but also because, at least until the construction of the separation wall that Israel erected in the West Bank, it was a commercial crossroads that functioned as a bridge between north and south. The other nodal points are Nablus and Hebron, but before the year 2000 Jerusalem was the central hub toward which everyone converged. Today it has been cut off, shut in by the wall, which Israel built officially to prevent Palestinian attacks from the West Bank, but which has effectively served to seize around 12 percent of the West Bank territory and to further undermine Palestinian territorial integrity (an opinion issued in 2004 by the International Court of Justice described the Western Wall as illegitimate and directed that it be dismantled, a directive that was never implemented). So today, Palestinians in Jerusalem and in Israel can go to the West Bank, but those who live in the West Bank can only enter the city with Israeli-issued permits, which are often difficult if not impossible to obtain.

This closure has catastrophically affected the local Palestinian economy, because shepherds, Bedouins, and many Palestinians engaged in rural and artisanal activities traded goods in the city and Jerusalem was a nerve center for the sale, for example, of dairy products, which were distributed from there throughout the region. Now it’s all over. As Amnesty International also highlighted in its 2022 report “Israel’s Apartheid Against Palestinians,” Palestinians live under separate jurisdictions and are subject to strict permits that separate them from each other and isolate them from their lands and families.

Getting Palestinian products into the city has become so complicated that traders end up selling products from the Israeli settlements. I remember that in the early days this surprised me a lot, but it is only another aspect of that schizophrenic space, so difficult to navigate.

Since the tragic events of October 2023, as restrictions, attacks, and abuses increased and the number of visitors decreased, almost all of the

Palestinian shops I knew have closed. A few orange and pomegranate juice stands have remained open for the small number of pilgrims who still visit the city, but what about the rest? In Jerusalem, many Palestinian families, working in hospitality and catering, depend almost exclusively on international tourism. I remember that already ten or fifteen years ago it was very rare to see Israelis venturing into the Arab areas of the city. It is even true that taxi drivers from West Jerusalem often refuse customers who want to go to East Jerusalem because they fear being attacked. Whether these fears are well-founded or not, they make Jerusalem a "naturally" divided city: like certain lakes where currents of water flow past each other without ever mixing. But here the division is man-made. The substance is that of a regime of racial or, more precisely, ethno-religious separation: apartheid.

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I LEFT JERUSALEM at the end of 2012, with my daughter, Leila, about to be born. Max had left shortly after the end of the summer, to move to Washington, DC. While waiting to join him, I stayed as long as my pregnancy allowed. I waited for the house to be emptied of all our furniture and said goodbye to it on a late-October morning, while the sunlight cast the shadow of the pomegranate tree on the terrace across the floor of my bedroom, in which only the mattress was left.

That's how George found me: sitting on the floor looking at my bare feet, as that play of shadows skimmed over them. He reached out to help me get up and we went to have a last breakfast on Salah al-Din: the last near apoplectic stroke for the restaurateur who was fed up with me and my obsession with green peppers for breakfast. Then we moved on to say goodbye to the Muna brothers, the owners of the Educational Bookshop, where I bought yet another stack of books before saying goodbye. George accompanied me in this string of farewells with his kind and mischievous smile. "*Habibti*," he would say to me affectionately every time I said something stupid. When he was serious, he called me "Frenci" (which has eventually become the name my closest friends call me) or "Kbire." From

Jerusalem onward, I have been Frenci Kbire (“big”) to differentiate me from our other dear friend, Francesca Bombi. She, for all of us, was and remains Frenci Sghire (“little one”).

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AFTER LEAVING JERUSALEM, Max, George, and I met again relatively early: In March he was the first dear person, after Max and my mother, to hold Leila, on her second day of life, in a clinic in DC. And over time we have never lost sight of “Uncle George,” who continued to come and visit us in the United States and Italy, just as I have found a way to see him every time I returned to Palestine, during the years of research and writing a book on Palestinian refugees.

Then genocide came down on all of us like a cleaver. We lost contact with each other. After a year, George and I started writing to each other again. He told me that he was not doing too well, maybe he also suffered from a bit of depression; after all, what Palestinian doesn’t feel depressed these days?

For me too there were moments of despair. I remember the first weeks of the genocide, between October and November 2023, when I often cried because I couldn’t get over my grief at all those deaths: two hundred, two hundred and fifty people a day, the children, the horrible stories I heard…I tried to resist, but at that time I was not there for anyone, sometimes not even for my children or my mother, whose mind in the meantime was continuing to evaporate. Every morning I had to get up, count the dead, try to understand what had happened, verify the information, talk to the other experts, respond to those who called me from Gaza or the West Bank, respond as much as possible to interview requests from journalists, remind myself to breathe. I have a vivid memory of an October morning when I was in Italy and did an interview with the BBC with my eyes looking like frog’s eyes, so much had I cried since the early hours of the day, looking at the images of the destruction of Gaza, unable to quell the anguish aroused

by the constant inhuman cry of revenge shouted by the hordes of young soldiers in assault gear.

Months of pure asphyxia followed.

Then, very slowly, it was as though I had to learn to construct a wall between me as a person and everything else, to be able to return to my life, but always a little half-heartedly, always faltering, struggling to accept the idea of having changed definitively, of having lost something that can never come back.

Meanwhile, in the early months of 2025, the Educational Bookshop jumped into the news. The Israeli army raided the store twice, arresting the owners and looting the shelves, removing all the books that had a Palestinian flag on the cover or something that was not to the liking of the military, including a copy of an Israeli magazine, a children's coloring book that was confiscated as evidence of incitement to terrorism, and an international law textbook, *Palestinian Refugees in International Law,* which I cowrote with Lex Takkenberg and which Oxford University Press published in 2020. Israeli settler colonialism, in fact, represses even the creation of a collective, Palestinian, international consciousness, which highlights the reality of the occupation. Why else would they destroy the places of culture, which on closer inspection are nothing more than spaces of peaceful resistance to the occupation?

This is also what it means to live in Jerusalem.

ALON

How do you recognize anti-Semitism?

> *Apartheid* was a new term but an old idea. It literally means "apartness"…What had been more or less de facto was to become relentlessly de jure. The often haphazard segregation… was to be consolidated into a monolithic system that was diabolical in its detail, inescapable in its reach, and overwhelming in its power.
>
> — NELSON MANDELA, *Long Walk to Freedom*

TODAY MORE THAN EVER, when Palestinians and those who defend them are accused of anti-Semitism, we must understand what is meant by anti-Semitism and what dangers can derive from the misuse of this term.

In May 2022, when I became the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, I had already been on the receiving end of an indecorous number of insults and the target of several reports issued by an organization called UN Watch. In theory, UN Watch is an organism established to monitor compliance with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, which promotes human rights on the part of governments within the system of the United Nations. In practice, however, it is purely and simply an instrument of Israeli propaganda inside the UN, an agency as charlatan in spirit and understanding of human rights as it is zealous in defaming anyone who dares to criticize the State of Israel. In the first summer of my tenure as Special Rapporteur, I was invited to appear at a hearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies. Responding to my presentation, and forgetting his role as a mere

moderator, the chairman of the committee — one of the oldest parliamentarians of the center-left party and, as I would discover, a notorious pro-Israel advocate in Italy — judged my interpretation of the Palestinian-Israeli question to be “unilateral” and recommended greater “impartiality.” In other words, he accused me of being biased.

In my naivety as a novice in my UN role, I was dumbfounded. In what sense would I be biased? Why would a politician call for impartiality from an international official who had diligently done her job, documented and legally analyzed facts, and agreed to accept the committee’s invitation to report on an extremely serious situation? The clash sowed chaos within the commission and eventually went public.

It was in the middle of this controversy that I met Alon Confino, an Italian Israeli university professor who taught history and Judaic and Near Eastern studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he was also the director of the American Institute for Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies.

Alon wrote a lovely open letter in my defense and proposed it to several Italian newspapers. In the end, it was never published, but a very strong collaboration and a beautiful friendship was born between us that lasted until the last days of his life, in June 2024.

In the early days of our acquaintance, Alon brought my attention to a very important issue, introducing me to the heated debate among Jewish scholars around the world concerning the definition of anti-Semitism proposed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

In truth, the definition of anti-Semitism should be self-evident: It consists of hatred, discrimination, prejudice, violence against Jews as Jews, just as Islamophobia is hatred, discrimination, prejudice, violence against Muslims as Muslims…and so on.

Instead, in 2016 the IHRA proposed a special definition of anti-Semitism that was verbose, complex, and mellifluous: “Anti-Semitism is a certain perception of Jews that can be expressed as hatred for Jews. Manifestations of real and physical anti-Semitism are directed at Jews or non-Jews and/or their property, Jewish community institutions, and

buildings used for worship." The definition, which is apparently innocuous, is accompanied by eleven practical examples largely conflating anti-Semitism with criticism of the State of Israel and its policies.

The risk of this definition is that it allows consideration of any criticism of the State of Israel as anti-Semitic. In summary, since Israel defines itself as a "Jewish state," to criticize it would be anti-Semitic, whether or not there are documented violations attributable to Israel. As Alon often told me, confusing criticism of the State of Israel with anti-Semitism is very risky both for the people of Palestine and for Jews themselves because, by reasoning in these terms, one makes an immediate association between all Jews and the State of Israel. But this is not the case. Alon was Israeli, he loved Israel deeply, and like him there are many American and European Jews who want nothing to do with the crimes of the State of Israel. Many of these Jews are anti-Zionist, some are not openly so, some not at all.

Moreover, by making improper equations between anti-Semitism and criticism of the State of Israel, one fails to focus on the *real* anti-Semitism that is repugnant and still exists: It is the anti-Semitism of those who see Jews — as well as Arabs or homosexual people — as something impure to be eliminated from the (Western) system in order to preserve its purity. In the words of Raz Segal, an Israeli professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Stockton University in New Jersey, it seems that the idea of the superior race, transformed into a political ideology of extermination by Nazi Germany a century ago, did not disappear with Hitler. This ideology has been hidden and transformed, but it still pulsates in the veins of our societies, even in Western societies that preach respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Segal has highlighted how concepts of racial supremacy have reemerged in contemporary contexts, emphasizing the use of rhetoric that dehumanizes Palestinians and recalls ideologies of racial supremacy.

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THE MYTH OF RACE, on closer inspection, was not even invented by Hitler. It hovers through five hundred years of colonization, starting in 1492 and the European “discovery of America.”

A striking example of the instrumental use of the myth of race is the popular notion that the history of the United States began on July 4, 1776, when the thirteen colonies officially broke from the British crown by issuing the Declaration of Independence. This event is seen as the birth of the United States as a sovereign nation, leaving aside the first two hundred and fifty years of European colonization of the Americas, during which it is estimated that tens of millions of Native peoples, entire civilizations, were exterminated by military conquests, slavery, deportations, and the spread of diseases brought by Europeans, against which the Indigenous peoples had no immunity.

These genocides, which in many regions caused a demographic collapse of from 70 to 90 percent of the original population, are rarely spoken of, or they are recounted in a reassuring way, normalizing the abomination. *The Rediscovery of America*, by Ned Blackhawk, is one of the most enlightening books I have read in this long two years of genocide in Palestine, and it is nothing more than a history of the genocides that preceded and then led to the creation of the United States from the perspective of its Indigenous peoples.

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TODAY NO ONE (or almost no one) denies the reading of European colonialism with regard to the Native peoples of the United States. Many centuries have passed and certain aspects of that colonialism continue to be illuminated with ever greater clarity. It seems that the discussion gets into hot water, however, when you touch on situations that concern the present.

I used to talk a lot with Alon about these topics. After our first emails and chats over the phone, we started an intense exchange. I had him and his close friend Amos Goldberg — a professor of Jewish history and contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and one of the

few Israelis who promptly denounced the post–October 7th genocide perpetrated against the Palestinians — read the report on self-determination that I was preparing in 2022 for the United Nations, my first as a Special Rapporteur, and they both said something like: “Good luck! The problem is not how you construct the idea of the right to self-determination but that you accuse Israel of being a colonial state.”

“But it is…”

“Yes, we know it is, but be prepared, because they will unload on you with everything they can.”

They were right. My visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which had been scheduled for December 2022, was blocked (as had happened to my predecessors since 2008) and the accusations against me of anti-Semitism have never subsided, despite the outcry in my defense from many parts of the world, from academics, journalists, and activists, with progressive Jews always in the front line.

At the same time, thanks to Alon and Amos, I immersed myself in a world of Jewish — mainly Israeli, British, and American — scholars with whom I have collaborated to counter what has been happening at the United Nations, where pro-Israel pressure groups, using every means at their disposal, were pressuring the secretary-general and others so that the United Nations would adopt the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism.

Those pressures have had real effects (such as the recent US sanctions against the International Criminal Court and myself).

Twenty-five of the twenty-seven European states to date have adopted this definition in some form, which though not legally binding has become a standard used by governments, universities, and even companies. In Italy, the Council of Ministers adopted the definition of the IHRA in 2020. Lufthansa and many other airlines have made it their own as well.

This means that if you wear a keffiyeh or a pin with the flag of Palestine, you may one day be considered subject to sanctions, since according to those parameters the flag or other symbols of Palestinian identity could be seen as an affront to the State of Israel or a denial of its

existence. This means an unprecedented level of oppression and rejection of reason.

Of course, we are also witnessing an unprecedented level of awareness. Never before has there been such a sustained questioning of the State of Israel. Never before has there been such a mobilization. I am not only talking about demonstrations and marches but also about important legal actions that are underway, such as those supported by various international organizations against the governments of the countries where they operate — for now the United Kingdom, Denmark, and the Netherlands — for having given support and transferred weapons to Israel at a time when it was committing very serious international crimes against the Palestinians; or like those initiated by the Hind Rajab Foundation, the association that calls for justice to be meted out to all Israeli soldiers about whom evidence of involvement in war crimes and acts of genocide has been collected.

Yet, in many countries, attempts are made to block these legal proceedings, precisely because they are accused of being “anti-Semitic.” Therefore, on the one hand there is certainly more knowledge and awareness but on the other hand there is also a growing repression: a symptom of the global oppression of which the Palestinians are victims. And this is happening not only at the hands of Israel but also in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe, where Palestinians are often discriminated against precisely because their very existence is thought to be a detriment or an embarrassment to the State of Israel.

The logical distortion, the lack of rationality, is evident. At times it almost seems like an obstinate desire to not understand, to show oneself unable to see what is right before your eyes. Perhaps because understanding demands action.

I am left speechless when I read certain articles that speak of “hateful Palestinians.” How can anyone, today, not feel anger or pain in the face of Israel’s actions, at the way it conducts them, and its ability to silence debate everywhere?

In any case, whatever one’s feelings, it is not feelings that should guide political choices. The criterion must be legality: that is the yardstick that

marks the limit of what politics can — and cannot — do.

In 2022, when I was becoming friends with Alon and Amos, hundreds of Jewish scholars worldwide had signed the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (as an alternative to the IHRA and true to the premise that anti-Semitism is hatred of Jews as Jews). At the time, faced with the risk of the IHRA definition being adopted by the United Nations, I decided to consult other Special Rapporteurs, those who from a thematic point of view could help understand and deal with the issue: defenders of freedom of expression, freedom of association, human rights. Jewish scholars sought our support against the dissemination of the IHRA definition, which in the meantime had also been rejected by its original drafters, given the shameless use that Israel and the pro-Israel pressure groups were making of it. Along with other Special Rapporteurs, I wrote to the UN secretary-general and the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, who had been given the mandate to deal with this definition of anti-Semitism.

In one year, we tried to make the consultative process initiated by the UN slightly more democratic, open to progressive and critical voices. How could the United Nations adopt a definition that not only did not define anti-Semitism but that was also extremely controversial and dangerous?

To date, that definition has not been officially adopted; moreover, although the United Nations has continued to hold discussions and seminars with these pressure groups, in the meantime the opposition has also grown and the doors have been opened to a group of scholars, including Alon, Amos, and others, who have repeatedly gone to confer with the United Nations.

In October 2022, a report by the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, E. Tendayi Achiume, studied the matter and declared in black-and-white that the IHRA definition, in addition to being contested by leading experts on the subject, was extremely dangerous: “Its de facto influence on the policies and practices of governments and private actors has contributed to violations of human rights, including freedom of expression, the right to assembly, and political participation, among others.”

In the meantime, I was preparing for my visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which was scheduled for December. For the first time, after fourteen years (from 2008 to 2022) in which the Israeli government had never responded to the requests of the Special Rapporteurs, I had decided to change my technique. Instead of asking for permission, I simply informed them: “I will be in Palestine from this date to this date and I will hold these meetings.” I wanted them to read between the lines: “You cannot stop me, because you are *just* the (illegal) occupying power; so I am going. I have been invited by the Palestinian National Authority, and I am informing you so that you can facilitate (and not obstruct) my mission as best you can.”

One day later, the Israeli authorities had already protested to the United Nations, complaining that I had not followed the rules, that I would still need their authorization to enter the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and indicating the procedures that I was to follow.

No problem. I complied with all the required procedures and went ahead with the organization of the mission. However, seven days before my departure, an Israeli newspaper — *The Times of Israel* — gave great prominence to a piece of news artfully prepared as a media bomb.

At the heart of the article was the accusation that I was indisputably an anti-Semite, as evidenced by a post I had published on Facebook at the time of the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip in July 2014, in which more than two thousand people were killed, including about five hundred children, and eleven thousand were injured. My post contained an appeal to a priest in my hometown to help finance the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which at that time was giving assistance to the affected population, and a criticism of the West which, in the face of the umpteenth scourge of Palestinians, remained inert, unlike the African, Asian, and Latin American countries. My post argued that neither Europe nor the United States were stopping the carnage, as the former was dominated by its sense of guilt for the Holocaust and the latter by the influence of “the Jewish lobby.” The unfortunate choice of words in that post is extremely obvious: While it is true that there is a very strong pro-Israel lobby, and that it is indeed possible

that many Jews are part of it, it is wrong to speak of a “Jewish lobby.” Beyond being offensive to the Jewish people, such a formulation also overlooks the role of other groups in supporting Israel — for instance, Christian Zionists for whom the return of the Jews to the Holy Land is seen as the fulfillment of a biblical prophecy, and whose religious fervor has exerted dangerous influence in the United States and beyond. What was even more problematic in my wording was the failure to distinguish between Zionist Jews — especially those who claim exclusive Jewish sovereignty “from the river to the sea” (a project that is discriminatory in nature and, as such, prohibited by international treaties, such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination) — and Jews who oppose this vision, or who simply do not wish to be identified with this political project. In other words, Israel does not represent all Jews, just as Italy, Spain, or the United States do not represent all Catholics.

It was December 15, 2022, and I remember every twist and turn of that day when this news spread rapidly, generating a broad echo, and I suddenly saw my head as Special Rapporteur rolling down the hill and ending up in the mud. But once again my Israeli friends and comrades came to my aid. That very evening, I connected via video conference with Alon and five others, who had read the news and were willing to help me deal with the situation. I still have the image of Alon, in his studio in Massachusetts, telling me: “Don’t panic, Francesca. *You can’t apologize.* They will mop the floor with your face if you apologize. You will have to distance yourself from the words you used, which were clearly infelicitous.” I had to understand what I had done wrong and own it, take responsibility for it as any mature person in good faith would do with a mistake made out of ignorance rather than ill or “anti-Semitic” intentions, which I clearly did not have. All the more, they encouraged me, do not take it personally; that attack had nothing to do with me but rather aimed to *distract me and the general attention* from the real issue. The focus of the discussion — Alon insisted — had to remain absolutely on the systemic and structural violence to which the Palestinians were subjected.

Alon was very good with words, sophisticated in thought as well as expression, so the concept of the *infelicitous* words proved to be fundamental to my public response, in which I asserted that the terms used at the time were not the same as those I would use now, that I was more educated on the matter, even more so in view of my mandate. That also turned into an opportunity to use the space created around the controversy to address the topic of anti-Semitism and articulate the distinction between heinous discrimination against Jews and mere criticism of the government of Israel.

The words of Alon, but also of Amos and of Daniel Levy, a former Israeli peace negotiator of whom I later became a huge admirer, had strengthened my position, helping me to build an armor around my commitment that still accompanies me today. Holding my head high in the face of such fury on that occasion earned me the respect of many sectors of civil society, including various progressive Jewish groups and many intellectuals who have since often mobilized in my support against the incessant accusations that have rained down on me.

For example, Avi Shlaim, a well-known Israeli historian and professor at Oxford University, published a letter a few days after that media assault in which he wrote: “The three main pillars of Judaism are truth, justice, and peace. Albanese embodies these values to a remarkably high degree. And there will be many Jews worldwide, disturbed by Israel’s betrayal of these core Jewish values.” In those difficult days, his words had a political and personal meaning that I will never forget. The whole affair only strengthened the collaboration and mutual esteem between Alon and me.

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AT THE START OF 2023, at the initiative of the Italian journal *Altreconomia*, Tino Magni, an Italian senator from a left party, invited me to present my report on self-determination to the Italian Senate, and I suggested that Alon be involved as well. Despite pressure from the Israeli embassy in Italy not to hold that event, I arrived in Rome enthusiastic to face this institutional

moment in my country having a figure of Alon's intellectual and human caliber next to me. Also, I was delighted to finally be able to meet him in person.

We arranged to meet in the afternoon the day before the presentation at a bookshop in the center of Rome. There I found this distinguished gentleman with an umbrella under his arm and a head of voluminous white hair moving in the breeze, which gave him the air of a person who does not take himself too seriously. We greeted each other and started walking. The destination was to walk, to keep talking, wherever our feet might lead us.

We walked for a long time through the streets of the Jewish Ghetto, we went to a bookstore, and we spent a lovely evening eating artichokes, drinking, discussing music and books along with a couple of friends of mine. I remember that at the end of the dinner, when we said goodbye after sending a selfie to Amos in Jerusalem, Alon laughed and said to me: "I wonder if anyone noticed that I was with you at dinner…Will I be safe crossing the Ghetto alone, at night?"

The next morning, we met near the Senate to make our presentation. They hosted us in a magnificent room, and we had the opportunity to touch on themes that were deeply felt by both of us. It was a beautiful event, and I appreciated immensely not only that Alon went out of his way to defend my reputation with his unquestionable authority but also the words he used, which in Italy are so rarely heard in relation to Palestine and Israel. Alon began his speech by talking about anti-Semitism, explaining its origin and evolution. He recalled that the term had been coined in 1879, marking a turning point in the nature of hatred of the Jews, which changed from religious to racial and political. He then spoke about the subject that first allowed us to get to know each other, namely the ideological use of the accusation of anti-Semitism, pointing out that too often it is used to silence well-founded and legitimate criticism of Israel and Zionism, thus diverting attention from the human rights of the Palestinians. According to Alon, "The accusation of anti-Semitism is often an ideological weapon against individuals, academics, journalists who dare to support equal civil, cultural,

economic, political, and social rights for Palestinians or denounce violations of international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory."

Alon also addressed the complex position of Israeli Jews, saying that they can be both victims and aggressors to the extent that Israel, although born out of the ashes of the Holocaust, today exercises oppressive rule over the Palestinians. He criticized the politicization of the memory of the Holocaust, reiterating that it cannot be used to justify human rights violations, and precisely for this reason he insisted on the need to distinguish between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, arguing that "talking about political aspects of Zionism and Israel is not anti-Semitism, it is part of the conversation and the debate we *must* have."

He felt it was his duty to denounce the apartheid to which the Palestinians were subjected, precisely in the name of his Judaism and his love for Israel. In the same way, I feel that it is also a duty for me, as an observer in this disturbing period in which Palestinians are being massacred and at the same time blamed and vilified in many influential quarters, as are those who defend and support them. I feel a sense of responsibility as a European who is aware of what Europeans have done for centuries, and as an Italian who is aware that Italians participated in the Holocaust, in the name of a racist ideology, less than a century ago. I fear that these ideologies may reemerge, and therefore I strive every day, with all the means at my disposal, to create a social fabric that will nip them in the bud.

In my speech that day, alongside Alon, I spoke of self-determination as the right to exist as a people, a right that cannot be negotiated — as I wrote in my report, "violations of international law should not be subject to negotiation, since this would legitimize what is illegal" — stressing that for too long the Palestinian issue has been reduced to a humanitarian crisis, instead of being dealt with as a political issue to be resolved in accordance with international law. To confine ourselves to giving aid without addressing the structural causes of the crisis is to perpetuate injustice by normalizing it, rather than doing everything possible to eradicate it. Furthermore, I challenged the narrative that presents the situation in Palestine as a "conflict," when in fact it is a structural condition of

domination and oppression, which falls within the paradigm of settler colonialism.

I explained that the Israeli occupation is not temporary but is part of a broader project that combines settler colonialism, apartheid, and military occupation. It is not possible to talk about development or “economic peace” without first ending domination, and that continuing to inject money and humanitarian aid is comparable to trying to mop the floor without fixing the leak, and on this the international community has failed, by adopting inadequate paradigms that do not address the roots of the problem. The basis of everything is the Palestinian people’s fundamental right to self-determination, a collective right that has been violated continuously for decades.

It seems obvious to me that this analysis has nothing to do with anti-Semitism, but only with the urge to apply the international laws that states have ratified. Laws are such — and therefore have the power to delimit the perimeter of politics, distinguishing what is granted from what is forbidden — only if they can be considered objective and universal, and therefore they must be guaranteed to every person on Earth.

I was happy that day to be able to speak in a formal and public setting of the hope that I see above all in the younger generations: certainly among the Palestinians, but also in international civil society, and among many Jews in the diaspora, especially in the United States. I explained that, in my opinion, most of the debates on various social demands are articulated, or should be articulated, through the language of human rights, which shows us how politics often arrives late or sometimes even opposes change. I gave the example of apartheid in South Africa, recalling that it had not been dismantled because, suddenly, other states had witnessed those atrocities and decided to act on their own initiative and impose sanctions. On the contrary. At first, many Western governments resisted both the condemnation and the idea of demanding accountability, until they found themselves practically forced to recognize that they could not oppose a global campaign of support for the anti-apartheid movement.

In the end, they had to give in to a reality they could no longer ignore. Yet that change had not come from above; it had also been the result of an internal struggle within South African society itself and years of mobilization of civil society throughout the world.

These words, spoken from that podium, with the support of many interviews published in various newspapers, had resonance in Italy. And since Alon was who he was, no one dared to attack him nearly as fiercely as they did me. His reputation, his temperament, that day, were a wonderful demonstration of how unity can really be strength.

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AFTER THE MEETING, we went for a walk around Rome again. Alon was a great intellectual, he had a powerful way of speaking and made you feel the strength of his ideas; yet at the same time he showed himself to be a simple, gracious, lighthearted man. After lunch with the journalists, the first thing he said to me was: “Come on, let’s go to the Colosseum, so we can take a picture to send to Amos and make him die of envy!”

There was no break between the friendly chat, the conversations regarding his beloved companion, Tal, and his children, who lived in Israel, and the continuation of the discussion we had started a few hours earlier at the Senate. I even remember that at a certain point, just as we arrived near the Colosseum, I was saying something to him like: “Don’t you believe that European Jews went to Palestine because they had nowhere else to go, and not because they really felt they had a connection with that land?” The narrative about why the Jewish state had settled in Palestine seemed a bit flat to me. Certainly, compared to other countries such as Argentina or Uganda, Palestine had a biblical appeal, but it also had much less available land. “So for all intents and purposes we can call it settler colonialism, right?” I continued. “Because the European Zionists would not have gone to Palestine if they had not in some way exploited or emphasized the religious element.”

At that point Alon stopped in the middle of the street, burst out laughing, and said to me: “Well, Francesca, if you were one of my students, now you would risk failing the exam!” And then, in a more serious tone: “It’s not really like that. What you say is not accurate. But maybe I can try to explain it better.”

And there, against the backdrop of the Colosseum, he spoke to me at length about the complex matrix of the claims for self-determination of European Jews. We didn’t even try to enter the Colosseum to see it from the inside, since the line was too long and we were both immersed in that conversation, so we stayed there on a bench chatting. “There is much more for us. The Jewish people have a very strong bond with that land and with Jerusalem in particular. It is our history. Obviously, the fact that there is this link between us and the land does not mean that we are the masters of it. But we must always be able to present the complexity of the historical process, including the fact that there was indeed nowhere else where many of us could feel safer. That is an important point. After the Holocaust, it’s not that we were suddenly protected, it’s not that at some point everybody opened their eyes and said, ‘Oh, poor Jews, let’s help them.’ No, they still didn’t want us. No one wanted us in Europe. We were the plague victims; we had to somehow disappear from their gaze. Because the Europeans could not even tolerate the idea that there were Jews who were victims of everything that had happened.”

Alon was not opposed to the idea of using the paradigm of settler colonialism in reference to Israel. “However,” he told me that afternoon, “we need to understand well what the specificities of Israel’s settler colonialism are. Because at the base there has always been a very strong bond with those places, and it would be wrong to say that the interest of the Jews in Jerusalem and Palestine is false and only an excuse. The love for that land is deeply rooted in our history and our culture.”

His words were poignant. Since that conversation, I have always carried with me the thought that the State of Israel gave protection, legitimacy, visibility to the Jewish people and to European Jews during a historical phase in which a very strong and widespread anti-Semitism was still alive,

making them, as a collective, feel they had a safe place for the first time in history. This understanding for me will always remain linked to Alon and that afternoon on the streets of Rome.

Even more important and unforgettable was the smile with which Alon ended the conversation, taking out his telephone and approaching me: “Come on, let’s send the photo to Amos and then, even if it’s cold, I would like to get some ice cream, what do you think?” I don’t remember if we really went to get an ice-cream cone. Certainly, however, we went from there to Trastevere, across the river, always walking and chatting, and then again to eat artichokes with my friend Rania Hammad, the daughter of the historic representative of the PLO in Italy, Nimer Hammad, and other friends. Parting in that jovial atmosphere was a nice way to say goodbye; and anyway, Alon and I already had a plan to see each other shortly thereafter.

In March 2023 we were organizing Alon’s participation in the presentation of my report in Geneva, when, on a video call of which I vividly remember his green pullover and imperceptibly troubled face, he said to me: “Do you know that I don’t know if I can come? I’m not so well, I have to do some tests.”

A couple of weeks later, in April, Alon was diagnosed with leukemia and his torment began. In the meantime, I was drafting my second report on the deprivation of personal liberty in Palestine, and Alon, along with Amos, proved again to be very supportive, reading various versions and giving me their comments, even while Alon was undergoing chemotherapy. After that, our correspondence thinned out and I tried to involve him less, because I realized that he was getting very tired.

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THEN, SUDDENLY, history went crazy again. October 7th exploded in our face with incredible violence. Just a couple of weeks later I went to the United States to present my report on childhood under occupation, which went completely unnoticed despite the fact that it was, as Amos said,

“heavy in everything”: the numbers of children killed, injured, maimed as a result of the various wars and attacks, the catastrophic situation of the lack of care which subsequently degenerated disastrously, but which even before October 7th was unbearable for many. Since 2006, it had been impossible for Palestinians to leave Gaza and almost nothing had entered without Israel’s consent, and this meant that no treatment was available for otherwise treatable diseases like diabetes. There have been children requiring special treatment that is unavailable in Gaza, who died within the walls of their homes because they did not have the necessary permission to go outside Gaza to be examined by a specialist or to receive the necessary medicines.

Yet, all this did not seem to be important to anyone. On the contrary, in Europe and other Western countries the focus of many people in power, for a long time, continued to be the attacks of October 7th, which were defined as “the worst anti-Semitic attack since the Holocaust.” Even the French president Emmanuel Macron, to whom one fine day I replied publicly, on social media: “The ‘greatest anti-Semitic massacre of our century’? No, Mr. Macron. The victims of October 7th were not killed because of their Judaism but in reaction to Israeli oppression. France and the international community have done nothing to prevent this. My respects to the victims.” This cost me the interruption of relations with French diplomacy, to put it mildly, but even in that case I could rely on the important words that Alon was writing in those months, which I drew on as a gift. He and Amos, along with other scholars of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, had signed an article in *The New York Review of Books* in November 2023 in which they criticized the instrumental use of historical memory to justify the aggression in Gaza. They denounced efforts to equate Hamas to the “new Nazis,” to attribute to the Palestinians a collective responsibility, and discredit those who defended their rights. They stressed the importance of distinguishing between Hamas and the Palestinian population as a whole, and warned that “the confusion between anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel” not only undermines the fight against real anti-Semitism but also legitimizes the

repression of dissent and the erasure of the Palestinian cause from public debate.

In October 2023, the very day I set foot in the United States, I called Alon and said: “I’m coming to see you.”

He was not well, and replied: “Excuse me, but I am not in a condition to see anyone, my immune defenses are very low, I can’t have you come to my home, I’m sorry.”

But at the suggestion of Amos, I took the liberty of insisting and in the end, we decided that I would visit him in Boston and, instead of seeing each other at his home, we would go out somewhere.

We met in a restaurant, where I finally met his partner, the wonderful Tal. We had found a completely empty place where we could see each other while keeping a distance, and he never took off his mask. We stayed a long time, chatting away and, effectively thwarting our efforts to take all those precautions, we ended the evening by embracing each other.

Alon was very dejected, and not only because of his health. He said: “Israel is finished. Now I really see the end of it, but I no longer have the strength to do anything.”

That was the last time I saw him. Alon Confino died on June 27, 2024.

INGRID

How do you overthrow apartheid?

> The naked man lifted his arms from his head.
>
> He had fallen and he stared about him. He stared at the one who had struck him, blood was coursing down his face, and the bitch Gudrun caught the smell of his blood.
>
> "*Fange ihn!*," said the captain. Gudrun bit into the man, tearing open his shoulder.
>
> "*An die Gurgel,*" said the captain.
>
> — ELIO VITTORINI, *Men and Not Men*

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD an articulate speech on the need to define the situation in Palestine as apartheid was in May 2017, at a conference organized in Jordan by academics and Arab civil society. Now it seems an obvious notion, but until a few years ago it was not obvious at all.

Let's start with the assumption that there are various instruments of international law to protect people, such as human rights treaties and, in situations of armed conflict, international humanitarian law (IHL). These were adopted after the two world wars basically to make conflicts less atrocious and to protect the civilian population as much as possible from the horror of war, but they also elevate individuals — and so not only, or not anymore only, states — to be subjects of law in the international sphere.

Human rights have not been gifted to us. Each of them is the result of the struggles and achievements of individuals like us. The slave trade was eliminated thanks in part to the abolitionist movement; apartheid and racial segregation were banned thanks to real civil battles; and in the same way

we have made important steps forward in the rights of workers, women, minors, people who are differently abled. The path to human rights is not linear, and the mission is never properly accomplished.

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BUT LET'S GET BACK to Palestine.

Until a few years ago, the main — if not the only — legal framework of reference for many, in relation to the Occupied Palestinian Territory, was that of IHL, that is, the laws of war and military occupation, according to which military occupation is accepted only if temporary, if it is linked to specific military needs, and if it takes place in full respect of the rights of the civilian population.

Israel, instead, has occupied Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem since 1967 without time limits or valid justification. The United Nations itself had called for its withdrawal, with a resolution approved a few months after the beginning of the occupation (Security Council Resolution 242), recalling that it is never legitimate to acquire territories by force.

Yet Israel not only has ignored that resolution but has extended its presence in the occupied territory, including the Syrian Golan Heights and recently swaths of southern Syria and Lebanon, none of which my UN mandate covers, replacing the local authorities with Israeli military personnel, imposing military law, expropriating land, demolishing homes, and building more than three hundred colonies, where about eight hundred thousand Israeli settlers live today. All this, even though such actions are recognized as illegal by international law. Two of the fundamental principles of the Charter of the United Nations are respect for the *principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples* [Article 1(2)] and the prohibition of the *threat or use of force* against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state [Article 2(4)]. Accordingly, the International Court of Justice has repeatedly reiterated that an occupying power must guarantee the fundamental rights of the occupied population and cannot impede the realization of the right to self-determination.

In Palestine, however, fundamental rights are not guaranteed, and the Palestinians are denied their right to self-determination.

To cover up its violations of international law, Israel has used terms such as “disputed” instead of “occupied” territory, of a “hostile” instead of an “occupied” population. The international community has also often preferred to cling to such terms rather than decisively address the unacceptable reality of permanent occupation and its consequences.

Meanwhile, in the shadow of this debate about terminology rather than actions, Israel has continued systematically to bulldoze not only the territories but also international law, distorting the very essence of law and justice. The illegality of this conduct is irremediable, because it touches one of the cornerstones of the international order, that it is the rule of law that must govern relations between states, not the arbitrary will of the strongest.

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THE YEAR 2017 was another powerful intellectual turning point for me, like the eye-opening experience of attending the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2005.

At a conference I attended in Jordan, Michael Lynk — my predecessor in the role of UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territory — explained why, based on the case law relating to South Africa’s occupation of Rhodesia and Namibia (then called South-West Africa), the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the West Bank should be considered illegal.

In a nutshell, the jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice had established that the South African presence in South-West Africa was illegal precisely because a) it did not respond to military purposes and b) it violated the fundamental obligations of the occupying power. These obligations provide that occupation must safeguard the well-being of the occupied population and not subjugate it, alter its identity, or change the status of the territory or the occupied population’s legal system.

Furthermore, South Africa's occupation had not been temporary: It had turned into a permanent condition.

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AS MICHAEL STATED THAT DAY in relation to the Namibia case, military occupation can never be considered a vehicle for the unlawful acquisition of territory, or annexation, and because this is what Israel's occupation in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza was doing, it was unlawful. *Bingo!* With those words, he had broken a barrier. If the occupation is unlawful, then it must not be normalized at all: Every aspect of an occupation must be monitored constantly and its end must be imposed, it cannot and must not become permanent.

My tenure at the United Nations had ended five years before that conference, but as I listened to Michael, he took me back to the time I had worked in Palestine, and suddenly everything became clearer. In my years in Palestine, I had often asked myself these kinds of questions: Why do we continue to refer to and rely on international humanitarian law, when the military occupation that this body of law regulates is serving to take away the land and destroy the lives of the occupied people?

The fact that the legal instrument of IHL had become inadequate to protect people was a notion that was somehow already present in me, but the words of my predecessor were important and, looking back, I said to myself: "Michael Lynk is right."

After Michael, Ingrid Jaradat Gassner, a longtime expert on Palestine, addressed the conference. Continuing the analysis of the most appropriate legal framework to apply to the Palestinian situation, Ingrid insisted on the use of the concept of apartheid. At the time, talking about apartheid in relation to Israel's conduct was not at all usual, especially outside of certain activist circles. The scope of what Ingrid said was so revolutionary that many of us did not fully understand it. Proof of this is that, in the scientific volume on Palestinian refugees on which I was working at that time with Lex Takkenberg, we considered the apartheid regime only marginally.

Although Ingrid was not a jurist, her contribution proved essential to the development of an integrated interpretation of all the rules protecting individuals and groups.

Ingrid was Dutch but had been living in Palestine for a long time, in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem, in the occupied West Bank. In 1998, she and her husband, Mohammed Jaradat, were among the founders of BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. In 2005, she cofounded Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS), inspired by the global resistance against apartheid in South Africa and based on international law. The movement was born shortly after a major advisory opinion in 2004 by the International Court of Justice, which ruled that the construction of the wall started two years earlier and Israel's practices in the West Bank and occupied Jerusalem were in serious violation of international law and the fundamental rights of Palestinians, such as freedom of movement, access to essential resources and services, and, above all, the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people.

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THAT WALL, which cuts off the Palestinians from Jerusalem and which even today, more than twenty years later, no one has managed to demolish, greatly reduces their possibilities. A group of people within a city like Jerusalem, surrounded on one side by Israel and on the other three sides by colonies in the occupied territory, cannot sustain an economy when their contacts with those outside the city have been severed. The wall also prevents families from staying together and in contact, as well as Christians and Muslims from going to Jerusalem to pray.

The landmark decision of the International Court of Justice was based on the right to self-determination, a right so central that, according to the law on the international responsibility of states, it must be upheld by all the member states of the United Nations and implies an obligation for all of them not to recognize the illegitimate situation created by the occupation and to take action to ensure compliance with international standards,

including human rights. Therefore, UN member countries would be obliged not to assist or support the occupation in any way, and also to ask for the demolition of the wall.

From a legal point of view, the decision of the International Court of Justice was epochal, because it was the first time that a court had ruled on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Yet, from a practical point of view, the decision changed nothing.

This is how in 2005, in response to the inaction of states after that pronouncement, BDS was created: a grassroots movement with the intention of promoting boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel to push it to return to the rule of international law and to comply with the principles of human rights. A perfect example, in my eyes, of what civil society should be: the immune system of a healthy society that respects universal rules, both nationally and internationally.

The movement Ingrid cofounded was inspired by the movement against apartheid in South Africa, which had conducted a major boycott, disinvestment, and sanctions campaign before states decided to act. Even today we cannot think of South Africa without the word “apartheid” coming to mind, but in that case the bulk of the work was done from below, and it all started from civil society, or rather from a single person: a young worker, who had decided to take the practical actions that were within her capacity.

It began in Ireland in 1984, when Mary Manning, a twenty-one-year-old supermarket cashier, in accordance with the directives of her union, refused to handle grapefruit from South Africa. When Manning and her union representative, Karen Gearon, continued to refuse to handle any South African products, calling on the other workers to do the same, they were suspended and started a strike that was joined by eight other colleagues.

The strike lasted almost three years, until April 1987, and set off a chain reaction that led Ireland to become the first Western country to impose a total ban on the import of South African goods, thanks to public pressure aroused by the courageous refusal of Mary and her colleagues.

The ban remained in place until the end of the apartheid regime in 1994. Nelson Mandela himself recognized the value of their gesture in 1990 when

he was awarded honorary citizenship of Dublin. On that occasion, Mandela declared that the strikers had shown South Africans that ordinary people far from the scene had played a pioneering role in the struggle against apartheid. This thought, he said, had also helped him to resist in prison. But that's not all. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 and invited the Irish protesters to attend the ceremony, the anti-apartheid movement that was born in Ireland was hit by a wave of support that fueled growing opposition to apartheid, taking a decisive step toward bringing down this system.

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TO MAKE THEM COLLAPSE, oppressive regimes must be struck at their heart, that is, in their pockets, which is where they receive the proceeds of exploitation. This is the philosophy underpinning BDS, which in fact undertakes to publicly expose international complicity — not only political but also economic — with the apartheid regime imposed by the State of Israel on the Palestinians. The apartheid analysis of the Palestinian situation, which Ingrid helped to develop, has also been taken up and strengthened by various human rights associations.

It is only recently that the apartheid framework has started to become common in describing the situation in occupied Palestine, after Palestinians and certain daring academics and politicians — e.g., Jimmy Carter in *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* — had used the concept for decades. In particular, two Israeli nongovernmental organizations that deal with documenting Israel's human rights violations in the occupied territory have helped mainstream the apartheid framework linked to the Israeli occupation. In 2020, Yesh Din spoke of apartheid limited to the West Bank, where Israel applies two distinct legal systems: one for Israeli settlers, the other for Palestinians. In 2021, B'Tselem published a high-impact report, accompanied by an iconic presentation to the UN Security Council by then-director Hagai El-Ad, in which he said that Israel imposed an apartheid regime on all Palestinians from the shore to the sea, that is, "from the River

Jordan to the Mediterranean." According to B'Tselem, Israel effectively controls the entire space between the Jordan River and the sea, ensuring the supremacy of Israeli Jews at the expense of Palestinians. The apartheid policies they identified included the political and territorial fragmentation of Palestinians, unequal access to land and resources, restriction of movement, and a discriminatory legal system, based on emergency laws, military orders, and regulations, such as the 2018 law recognizing the right to self-determination "only to the Jewish people."

In 2021, Human Rights Watch reinforced these analyses in a detailed report, calling Israeli apartheid an institutionalized system of domination and oppression. The report concluded that Israel was not only committing the crime of apartheid but also persecution, that is, the systematic and intentional deprivation of a group's fundamental rights. "The Israeli authorities methodically privilege Israeli Jews and repress Palestinians," with the stated aim of maintaining demographic, political, and territorial control.

In 2022, Amnesty International confirmed that Israel practices apartheid both in the occupied territory and within its borders, adding that the system also involves Palestinian refugees, who are excluded from the right of return to the property that they or their ancestors were forced by the Israelis to leave in 1948 and 1967. In its report, Amnesty International explicitly indicates that "the Israeli authorities and others involved must dismantle the system of apartheid against the Palestinians and put an end to the related human rights violations."

So then, is Israel an apartheid state or not? According to international law, it certainly is. The Israeli occupation of Palestine is a system created to maintain the supremacy of one racial group over another through discriminatory and oppressive practices. Although historically one immediately thinks of the South African regime, the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid classifies it as a crime against humanity that any state can commit by means of inhuman gestures — such as forced deportations, illegal arrests, torture, and restrictions on freedom of movement — carried out to systematically

oppress one racial group, keeping it under control in favor of another. The Rome Statute also classifies apartheid as a crime against humanity, in that it consists of acts committed “in the context of a widespread or systematic attack against civilian populations.”

It is not just a question of discrimination but of the denial of fundamental rights, of the separation of people on racial and territorial grounds, and of the use of coercive measures to keep the oppressed group isolated and subordinate.

Thus, broadening the perspective beyond the case of South Africa, the characteristic of apartheid is institutionalized segregation that has as its objective the domination of one group over another, something which, on closer inspection, is also the pillar of, especially, settler colonialism. Who would say that France in Algeria or King Leopold’s Belgium in the Congo did not practice an apartheid regime? Apartheid can exist — and certainly does exist — even in contexts of colonialism that are different and much broader than those with which we customarily associate the term.

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ONLY A FEW YEARS AGO, even in 2022, when I became Special Rapporteur of the United Nations, talking about apartheid in relation to Israel — as my predecessor, Professor Michael Lynk, had done in March of that year — seemed very difficult, so much so that some people in international diplomatic circles limited themselves to whispering “the A word,” as if “apartheid” were an expletive. Today, awareness of the nature of the occupation is already much more widespread and I am sure that in a few years the word “apartheid” will automatically be associated with the State of Israel, as it was in the past with South Africa.

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IN THE CASE OF ISRAEL, its many violations must include millions of lives broken, killed, maimed in body and soul, and a destroyed Gaza. The genocide that has been going on since October 2023 cannot be erased from

the history of the State of Israel, and I suspect that the whole world will feel a chill on seeing the Israeli flag, for what has been done in its name and under its aegis.

Today we are experiencing this reality without being fully aware of it, because humans need time and distance to observe and reflect. But we must not forget that the longer this time lasts, the more innocent people will die. That is why it is essential to continue to explain what we are facing and to support the movement of reaction necessary to counter it. Even simply informing oneself and others is an important contribution to defeating apartheid.

Of course, in the case of South Africa the apartheid policy had much less support than that enjoyed by the State of Israel today, which comes from multiple and varied sources. Here, we are not dealing merely with a substantial part of the Israeli administration but also with the vast network that has been built up throughout the Western world and beyond, through hyperactive embassies and refined communication techniques that market Israel as “the only democracy in the Middle East” and “the start-up nation.” This new narrative has replaced the slogans in vogue at the time of Golda Meir: “A state that made the desert flourish” and “A people without land for a land without people.”

Israel is now supported by the political, cultural, and financial elites of various countries, first and foremost the United States, thanks in part to a very effective political lobbying structure and to the connivance of Israel’s military apparatus with the powerful American war industry (a very interesting book by Antony Loewenstein, *The Palestinian Laboratory*, analyzes these relationships in depth).

Another important component is represented by the now ubiquitous Christian Zionist groups, which are very active, especially in the United States. Based on conservative interpretations of the Bible, they see the “return of the Jews to Palestine” as a fulfillment of prophecy and support for Israel as an integral part of their faith, thus significantly influencing US foreign policy. Moreover, Christian Zionism is booming even in the Global Majority, or Global South, where Christian proselytism carries with it, in an

increasingly ubiquitous way, the Israeli flag. To cope with such massive obstacles, BDS has had to organize itself in a much more structured way than the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Within BDS, therefore, the Palestinians have created the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, which promotes the boycott of Israeli academic and cultural institutions that are complicit with or loyal to the occupation, apartheid, and the denial of Palestinian rights — and a widespread transnational network of organizations and experts who support calls for specific boycotts, divestments, and sanctions, weaving the web of peaceful, strategic, and active resistance to Israeli apartheid.

This is where the economic factor comes into play, which leads me to say: If Palestine were the scene of a crime, all of our fingerprints would be found there. There are many companies, pension funds, banks, foundations, organizations from various countries that continue to invest in the Israeli economy, and this is of course an inextricable element of the occupation. While the strong sectors of the Israeli economy, such as armaments and surveillance, are the most obvious, it is important to remember that any investment in the Israeli economy may have an implication or connection with the occupation and exploitation of Palestinians and their resources, and thus become a de facto act connected to criminal conduct. Just like the grapefruits that Mary Manning refused to pass through her supermarket register forty years ago. My June 2025 report “From the Economy of Occupation to the Economy of Genocide” focuses on this type of economic linkages and must have hit a nerve so sensitive that the US administration sanctioned me a few days after its publication.

Faced with a situation like this, the call of the BDS movement — which is fully in line with international law — must be supported in every possible way: from what we buy to how we invest, from where we go on vacation to whom you elect to office. Each of us is called upon to make “apartheid-free” choices. Justice for Palestine begins with the steps each of us takes.

This justice is becoming more necessary every day, given the crimes that Israel continues to commit today. South African whites never reached a degree of violence intended to annihilate the entire Black population; their

goal was to segregate and dominate rather than to exterminate. Today, in Israel-Palestine, the reality is completely different. Denouncing and overcoming apartheid, which could have been a great opportunity for change, has instead become a missed opportunity, especially after the catastrophic events following October 2023.

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AT THE END OF MARCH 2025, my friend and former colleague Lex Takkenberg, with whom I worked on the book on the history and legislation concerning Palestinian refugees, wrote to me: “These days we really need Ingrid. I miss talking to her, discussing, understanding.”

Ingrid was a constant source of inspiration and positivity. On my visits to Bethlehem, during the period in which I was teaching at the local university, I happened to meet her several times, and also to visit her in the beautiful stone house covered with climbing flowers where she lives with her husband, in a quiet area, far from the buzz of Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity, which was built around the cave where Jesus is said to have been born.

The last time I saw her, in 2019, we had arranged to meet right there, basically because getting to Ingrid’s house, with my painful Arabic, would have been a nightmare for me and for the unfortunate taxi driver. The stone walls of the Grotto of the Nativity, covered with flickering candles, create an intimate and mystical atmosphere; and although I did not feel any particularly religious call, in front of the silver star that marks the supposed birthplace of Jesus I could not help feeling a deep respect for the sacredness of that place and for the history and hopes of so many who venerate him. It was a very short meeting: Ingrid was called away by commitments elsewhere. A pity, because I was going through a delicate period and felt the need to be reassured by someone whom I trusted and respected. Lex and I had just finished our book and launched a consultation involving Palestinian civil society, some Israeli scholars and activists, and international experts on the *durable solutions* for Palestinian refugees that

we proposed in the final chapter. Under international law, we affirmed that Palestinians have the right to return, compensation, and self-determination, but we also affirmed that anyone — from refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, or Jordan, or from Egypt and other parts of the world where the people of Palestine live as stateless people — who wishes to move elsewhere and apply for citizenship should be able to access opportunities for *resettlement*, or legal transfer.

This last proposal, however, aroused suspicion among many Palestinians, some even accusing me of promoting a "pro-Israeli" agenda and of wanting to threaten the right of return.

I knew that Ingrid had understood my intentions when I spoke of a policy of rights against the "policy of pain" promoted by those who want to keep the refugees in the camps at all costs, waiting for their right of return to be honored even though, in the seventy-seven years that have passed since the Nakba, that return has not moved one millimeter closer.

But on that day, I kept those thoughts to myself and, having said goodbye to Ingrid, I went to seek out a little silence in the church that was built in memory of a Palestinian born two thousand years ago, who must necessarily have been dark-skinned, because with very rare exceptions, populations of blond people with fair complexions had not arrived in those parts; a church where, during the second intifada, the young people of the Palestine resistance had gone to take refuge to avoid being besieged and beaten — of course, without success.

Every time I see the Basilica of the Nativity I cannot help but think of the birth of that boy and his crucifixion, which today I seem to see again in the destruction of his people, who have tried to resist but are succumbing. If we make the effort to view this people organically, as a body that has resisted with all its strength, that has sacrificed itself to defend itself, perhaps our perspective of Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation will also change.

Understanding resistance does not, of course, mean justifying violence against Israeli civilians, but it allows us to see that it arises first and

foremost in response to the destruction of a people that is now reaching its final phase.

In Palestine today there is essentially no room for resistance; some fight here and there but they can't make it: They have no weapons to face the most impressive army in the Middle East, supported by the strongest military power in the world. Many no longer have the strength to react; they can't get back on their feet. It is not an equal fight, and in unequal struggles those who have no means defend themselves as best they can.

We are no longer in the era of Italian partisans or decolonization after the Second World War, when resistance was seen as something heroic; today we have forgotten that Mandela entered prison to serve almost thirty years on terrorism charges, and that it was only in 2008 that the United States removed his name from the terrorist blacklist. We have forgotten that in the eyes of the Nazis the Italian partisans were terrorists, and that within a mechanism between oppressor and oppressed each person can be seen as a terrorist by some and as a hero by others.

Unfortunately, resistance is sometimes also violence, and it is usually all the more violent the more violent the oppression. Right now the Palestinians are desperate. If every people is like a body, the Palestinian body has been belted many times, for a very long time, and today even more so.

I was a child at the time of the first intifada in 1987, but I will never forget the images I saw on TV, squeezed on the sofa between my brother and my mother, with police vans taking the boys who threw stones and blindfolding them. There was this boy in a green shirt, his curly head and eyes covered, I remember the soldiers who held his arm and broke his bones with stones. I remember the Palestinians who were on the ground, attacked by dogs…How many years have the Palestinians suffered like this, and how much are they suffering now that cruelty is overflowing any conceivable barrier?

In this strange spring of 2025, it is difficult for me to imagine the future. It is almost impossible for me to imagine a rebuilt Gaza except as a great monument commemorating the genocide, but that does not mean that I see

the end of the Palestinian people: The Palestinians will rise again, but now the Israelis are tearing apart the body of this oppressed people, just as the Roman politicians did two thousand years ago with the body of that boy. And we are called to ask ourselves if we want to be part of the ranks of those who wash their hands of it, of those who, paraphrasing Fernando Pessoa, will be condemned to suffer from the wounds of the battles they have not fought.

Beyond my inveterate anticlericalism, I think that Jesus was a revolutionary of love, one who was not afraid to go to the Temple to make a credible *ammuìna,* as we say in my area. He was aware that he was bringing with him a higher, more human, and salvific truth than that proclaimed by the sages of his time, the men of the Temple. He did not limit himself to making the revolution, he *was* the revolution, with all of himself and in every act of his life, without normalizing anything: That is what we must do too.

Either we commit ourselves to *being* the revolution or we will fail, because no change can happen in the world if it does not first happen within us. We must strip ourselves, one preconception at a time, of all the baggage that each of us carries in order to go more and more toward the truth every day.

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INGRID JARADAT GASSNER was a tireless and silent revolutionary. Her revolution was expressed in the way she used the international regulatory system like a Lego box, seeing all the pieces of the legal system at her disposal, dismantling them and putting them back together to strengthen rights and ensure protection. By explaining how the apartheid framework applies to Palestine, Ingrid revealed what our eyes could not yet see. Here too it is important to do the exercise of always considering the Palestinian people organically, as a single body. That is why we must not forget that even the refugees who are outside their land are still victims of apartheid,

which controls them by other means — for example by preventing them from returning.

Refugees are an integral part of the Palestinian issue, and by helping to set up the BADIL research center, Ingrid helped to do an immense job of mapping refugees, analyzing data, and making recommendations.

Finally, her latest project of “defending defenders” has been to offer pro bono legal assistance to anyone who finds themselves the victim of attacks on the basis of the instrumental use of accusations of anti-Semitism — used by Israel as a shield against criticism — including a large number of BDS people who were criminalized simply for telling the truth and calling for the application of international law. A strategy, therefore, to protect and defend those who in turn defend the cause of the people of Palestine.

Ingrid passed away on November 16, 2023. I didn’t even know she was sick.

I was very sad that a woman like her — a true revolutionary, activist, intellectual, altruistic fighter, capable of working behind the scenes, contributing her vision without any interest in taking center stage — had gone without my having had any way to see her again. I would have liked to bid her farewell and thank her for the teachings she gave to me and to all of us.

Some maintain that knowledge is not a process of acquisition but of progressive unveiling, of liberation from preconceptions. In my understanding of the Palestinian question, Ingrid has certainly been one of the figures to whom I am truly grateful for helping me to open my eyes and see more clearly. I once talked about her with Omar Barghouti, one of the cofounders of BDS. After expressing his esteem for me, Omar told me clearly and firmly: “Don’t think that even you are exempt from *racial bias*!”

“I know,” I replied. “And yes, I’ve removed it. In fact, I’m still removing it bit by bit, as if I were peeling off the layers of an onion.”

It is precisely for this reason that the cultural legacy that Ingrid leaves us never ceases to be precious — indeed, crucial — to peeling away the

layers of ignorance and preconceptions that we inevitably, unconsciously, carry and that weigh down our understanding of reality.

Among Ingrid's most important lessons is a fundamental concept: When people are oppressed, they deserve total, unconditional, and principled support. We need to know how to listen, we really need to look at who we have in front of us, to have a "horizontal" vision of co-resistance and avoid any form of paternalism toward others.

A striking example is the 2024 documentary film *No Other Land*, directed by Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham, and Rachel Szor, an Israeli-Palestinian collective of activists, which deals with the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and the destruction of Palestinian property by Israel. Many people, myself included, found it admirable. The film has won numerous awards, including the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2025.

And yet some in the BDS movement saw it as a form of normalization and criticized it. I didn't understand. I said: "Seriously? Are you going to try and poke holes in a project like *No Other Land*?"

"Be careful, this is the most insidious form of normalization," they replied.

Today, I understand. I also see the danger.

It is true, at the Oscars ceremony, Basel Adra spoke first: "About two months ago I became a father, and my hope to my daughter [is] that she will not have to live the same life I'm living now, always fearing settlers' violence, home demolitions, and forced displacements that my community, Masafer Yatta, is living and facing every day under Israeli occupation. *No Other Land* reflects the harsh reality that we have been enduring for decades and still resist as we call on the world to take serious actions to stop the injustice and to stop the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people."

And it is also true that Yuval Abraham, whom I hold in high esteem, clearly articulated the relationship of inequality between him and Basel in his speech: "We see each other. The atrocious destruction of Gaza and its people, which must end. The Israeli hostages brutally taken in the crime of October 7th, which must be freed. When I look at Basel, I see my brother.

But we are unequal. We live under a regime where I am free, under civilian law. And Basel is under military laws that destroy his life and he cannot control.”

Everything Yuval said is true. Yes, the destruction of Gaza must stop. And yes, the hostages must go home.

But all hostages should be included: the Israelis and also the thousands of Palestinians, including hundreds of children, who are languishing in Israeli prisons, mistreated, often tortured unbearably.

For Palestinians, the reality of occupation, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, and now genocide is often neither admissible nor understood unless it is immediately relativized, tempered by Israeli experience and narrative. As if the Palestinians could only tell their story, their resistance, express their suffering, denounce the injustice they suffer in the presence and with the approval of a more legitimate voice, that of the Israelis. Can a Palestinian voice exist for itself? One has to wonder how many Palestinian-directed films have been funded, produced, distributed, seen, and recognized in an industry like Hollywood. One has to wonder if Basel would have had the chance to speak, or even to come to the Oscars, if he had been alone, without Yuval.

This is not to question Yuval’s commitment nor the impact of the film, but the biases and mechanisms of normalization are powerful and arrayed against any Palestinian narrative to such an extent that it is Yuval’s word that ultimately serves as a scale of legitimacy and captures attention and sympathy.

Yuval’s life in Israel has become hell. But Awdah Hathaleen, a Palestinian activist who collaborated on the film, paid with his life. He was shot dead on July 28, 2025, in the West Bank by Yinon Lev, an Israeli settler already sanctioned by the European Union and the United States for previous violence.

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THE RIGHT WORDS are very important as a prelude to and preparation for the right actions. So, in 2017 for me it was absolutely not an exercise in pure theoretical jurisprudence to understand how much the definition of apartheid was appropriate to the ongoing situation in Palestine, and it is not such an exercise today to recognize the need to adopt the word “genocide” to define everything that was already in preparation for some time and that has been unleashed in a more striking way since the end of 2023.

Seeing, understanding, placing the situations we witness in the correct framework are essential preparation for action.

In my fourth report to the United Nations, which I called “Anatomy of a Genocide,” I denounced the fact that Israel was carrying out a veritable *pseudo-humanitarian* camouflage of its systematic and predominate violations of the law. In this way, Israel has overturned the foundations of international humanitarian law, giving the world the perception that it is legitimate to target civilians, considering them human shields or collateral damage.

When Israel uses Palestinians as human shields to enter homes or takes inmates from prisons to use as shields during assaults, that is literally *human shielding*: a well-defined concept that is explicitly forbidden under international law. And this behavior turns that prohibition on its head.

Israel tends to speak of “evacuation orders,” of “protected zones,” but it has inverted the language of international humanitarian law to justify its military conduct and its war crimes, erasing the fundamental principles of discipline and protection in times of armed conflict: the distinction between civilian and military, military necessity, proportionality.

On closer inspection, is it not *humanitarian camouflage* that Israel has always practiced in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, blowing smoke in the eyes of the international community, which has allowed it to do so? Why have all of us involved in Palestine in various capacities — human workers, diplomats, international officials, experts in the field — been too cautious about denouncing the total and progressive oppression of the Palestinians? Instead, we have been obsessed with the idea of not disturbing Israeli sensibilities.

This attitude has allowed Israel, which aimed, well before 1967, to expand its hold over what remained of historic Palestine, to advance its interests hidden behind the facade of the law of war, while sowing the seeds of conduct that today appears in every respect as the precursors of genocide.

The will, especially in the West, to maintain a “neutral” narrative free of de facto conflicts has permitted injustice and suffering, ignoring what the Palestinians have always said and demanded.

When I lived in Palestine, I felt this profound incongruity within me, and one of the things that made me suffer the most was having the perception that even the United Nations, the development sector, and the humanitarian sector were an integral part of the glass ceiling that prevented the Palestinians from advancing the fulfillment of their rights.

The facts are what make the difference, because the correct knowledge of a situation and the correct choice of words to describe it are certainly an indispensable element in being able to defeat apartheid and stop the genocide of the Palestinian people. However, as always, the words in themselves are not enough and must be translated into actions, otherwise all discourse will be in vain and unable to change by as much as a comma the atrocity of what is happening.

Another thing that has happened in these very days, while I’ve been writing, is that I participated in a meeting with a high-ranking official of a European government closest to Palestine, a meeting that I came out of with so much anger I felt like crying the minute I signed off. I found myself arguing again with this high state official, trying to understand what concrete actions the government he represents had taken to oppose the injustice of the settlements and facilitate their dismantlement. When I asked, “What are you doing about this?,” he gave this tight-lipped response: “Come on, you can’t be so critical of us, we’re certainly not the worst in Europe.”

I pointed out to him that their country invests more than any other in the occupied territories, but he just shrugged his shoulders. “What do you want us to do, boycott Israel?”

When I insisted on the fact they could at least avoid using their profits to make the situation worse, he told me loudly and clearly that I was neither diplomatic nor constructive, and that I didn't understand how much they had been committed to supporting the Palestinian National Authority, with the objective of helping them kick Hamas out of the Gaza Strip.

"But that is none of our business," I told him, in a calm tone and pronouncing every syllable. "It is not up to you to choose who governs in Palestine. You just have to give a useful contribution to ending the occupation, so that there will be something left of Palestine." That is what international law requires.

Yet I will admit that those who have criticized me over the years have been right, at least on one point: It is true that in some ways I am not constructive. No, I am not constructive when I talk to certain politicians who keep repeating their lies. I am not good at bearing the wounds of unfought battles, to use Pessoa's words again. But at least I am not destroying the lives of a people and cheering about it, and I hope that when I come to the end of my life, I will know that I did everything I could to help them. I am doing and will continue to do what is in my power, going on to learn and peeling away the layers of "my onion" with the help of the people who can teach me. As Ingrid did. She will always remain a teacher for me.

These are the words engraved on her tomb, near Bethlehem: "We promise to smile every time we can, as you did; to go on at all costs, fighting, reflecting, defending hope in the face of pain, falling, getting up, changing paths, resuming the struggle and finally winning our liberation!"

GHASSAN

How far can the cruelty of genocide go?

> The propaganda machine had already been activated in favor of the “fight against terrorism,” supporting with great ease the need to do justice and defend human rights without paying much attention to the fact that war is itself legitimized terrorism, absolute injustice, irremediable violation of every right.
>
> — GINO STRADA, on Emergency’s intervention in Afghanistan in 2001

SOME THINK THAT in Israel-Palestine there are two parties to this so-called conflict.

Others believe that this is not the case and, if this story could be staged as a Greek tragedy, the main characters would be the Palestinians, the Israelis, and Western imperialism, the latter supported by a chorus representing the vassalage and oligarchic selfishness of various Arab governments.

“This ‘war,’ ” says Ghassan Abu Sitta, a surgeon who is a naturalized British citizen, “has shown that the link between Western imperialism and Israel is a continuum without interruption. Israel is an integral part of the Western imperialist project in that area: a colony linked to the West, like all the colonies of past centuries.”

Ghassan spent several weeks in Gaza after the onset of the Israeli military campaign to take revenge against the people of Palestine who were assumed to be collectively guilty of the bloody assault on October 7th. He

made his personal contribution to the hospitals of Gaza for as long as it was possible for him to operate. Then he made the enormously difficult decision to return to Britain in November 2023. “When I left Gaza and arrived in the United Kingdom, I realized that the genocidal project was like an iceberg. Israel is only the visible tip, but the rest of the iceberg — which is not so clearly visible from Gaza — is the entire apparatus that makes genocide possible: the BBC, CNN, *The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal,* the organizations that support it.”

Ghassan was elected rector of the University of Glasgow in March 2024, and since then all kinds of things have happened to him. Far from giving him the hero treatment he deserved, the Western establishment was preparing to retaliate against him.

To begin with, the pro-Israel group UK Lawyers for Israel filed a complaint against him, accusing him of being “unfit” to practice medicine because of his presumably incendiary social media posts; hence the request for suspension of his medical license submitted by the General Medical Council, rejected by the court of interim orders for lack of evidence and for the presentation of unreliable translations of the posts. The court accepted the arguments of the defense, which had shown that the accusations set out in the complaint were politically motivated and aimed at undermining his public credibility and limiting his freedom of expression.

Some BBC journalists then told him that the broadcaster had placed him on a list of Palestinians who could no longer be interviewed and, in the spring of 2024, he was prevented from entering France, the Netherlands, and Germany, where he was supposed to give lectures, because he was banned by the German authorities from the entire Schengen Area, a maneuver subsequently declared unlawful by the Potsdam Administrative Court.

“Meanwhile,” Ghassan points out, “Germany has been increasing its arms supplies to Israel tenfold, while the British air force is taking charge of electronic espionage by flying its planes over Gaza. Furthermore, the Italian air force refuels the Israeli F-35s that are preparing to bomb Sanaa in Yemen. All this shows that the Palestinian problem is not a matter of

misunderstandings. The problem is that the Western powers are using Israel as an instrument to protect their interests in the region. But these Western political elites will have to come to terms with the fact that public opinion is changing. To observe this change, all you need to do is measure the level of oppression in the West itself: Thousands of university students have been arrested in the United States. In the United Kingdom, even Holocaust survivors and organizers of anti-war demonstrations have been arrested. In Germany, police brutality against demonstrators has become systematic."

As soon as he returned to the United Kingdom, Ghassan decided to cooperate with Scotland Yard, providing his testimony on the war crimes he accuses Israel of committing. Calling the current situation an unprecedented wave of destruction compared to the previous wars on Gaza, he declared that the attacks of the last year and a half constitute "a real tsunami of violence." For example, he reported seeing wounds that were certainly caused by white phosphorus, wounds that were familiar to him. "The use of white phosphorus is prohibited by international law. I immediately recognized those burns: I had already treated them in 2009."

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ONE EVENING, in London, I sat at Ghassan's side during a conference at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and I was able to listen to his terrifying stories, which have been ruining my sleep for months.

During the course of his work at Al-Shifa and Al-Ahli hospitals, where he treated the victims of Israeli bombings, Ghassan performed up to twelve operations a day, many of them on children, including a sad night in which he had to carry out six amputations on minors. According to his estimates, in the first months since the beginning of the conflict in Gaza, some nine hundred children underwent amputations. "When you start operating on a minor, you know that that child will have to undergo at least ten or fifteen more operations between now and adulthood," he told us that evening. Who is going to do those operations? Where are these operations going to be

carried out if there is nothing left of the health system in Gaza? What will happen to the future of those children, assuming they manage to survive?

Israel's justification for bombing Al-Shifa Hospital (and any other hospital for that matter) is based on the claim that it was a Hamas operations center, which Ghassan categorically denied that evening. "In the hospitals I have only seen wounded and dead. Not even a shadow of Hamas." This knowledge is also shared by assistance workers and the media, and the Israeli army itself has been unable to provide a shred of evidence that did not appear to be fabricated. For example, an image circulated at the beginning of the genocide by the Israel Defense Forces showed an Israeli officer pointing to a sheet of paper with writings in Arabic on the hospital wall, which had been presented as a Hamas operational plan but later was discovered to be simply a planning chart of the shifts of hospital staff.

That the hospitals were only hospitals is also demonstrated by the photographic images that Ghassan has collected — and which the media have judged too crude to be broadcast to the public — which show nothing but corridors overcrowded with people screaming in despair, mutilated limbs, charred bodies.

"When the Israelis besieged Al-Shifa Hospital," he told us, "I was stuck in Al-Ahli, which had become the only functioning hospital in Gaza, even though it had already suffered great damage. In other hospitals in south Gaza, I saw my colleagues sitting around and not being able to do anything because there was no power to run the operating rooms. At least in Al-Ahli there were still two operating rooms and an X-ray machine, even if we could no longer use the CT scan. In addition to myself, there was an orthopedic surgeon and a couple of other general surgeons, but the air raids were so monstrous, and the number of patients arriving was such that we were forced to operate continuously for twenty-two hours. At that point, however, we had finished everything. At five o'clock in the morning, the anesthetist came out of the operating room and announced: 'That's it, there's nothing, there's no propofol, there's no oxygen, there's nothing with which I can sedate the patients.' The Al-Ahli Hospital also had to stop. We

had no drugs to administer, and that was when I realized that the biggest problem was not the shortage of doctors; it was that the health care system was progressively being emptied of its ability to function, to the point that doctors were actually in excess, compared to the available supplies and facilities. On that last night I was in the south, the wounded were taken to Al-Ahli in donkey carts, because there was no petrol for the ambulances. I also believe that over two hundred and fifty health workers were arrested by Israeli forces during that period. Some of them were tortured and many people, probably hundreds, are still prisoners in Israeli jails. I myself probably avoided arrest only because at some point I moved from Al-Shifa to the south, where I could still try to do something."

What has continued to happen in Gaza since the autumn of 2023 confirms Ghassan's words and fears. How could anyone refuse to accept the definition of genocide in the face of the horror that has struck Gaza? Who could possibly believe the propaganda that attempts to frame such an atrocious extermination as a "conflict"? Would they use the term "conflict" to define what the European colonists who created the United States did in sweeping away with blasts of gun powder and continuous famine hundreds of tribes of Native North Americans, massacring an entire people and impaling the heads of the most-loved tribal chiefs for everyone to see to sow terror among the people and discourage resistance?

Some time ago, in *The Guardian*, I read the testimony of Dr. Issam Abu Ajwa, who said that, after he was arrested by the Israelis, his torturers were explicitly asked to break his hands so that he could no longer operate. Then there was the story of Dr. Adnan al-Bursh, head of the orthopedic surgery department of Al-Shifa Hospital and a close friend of Ghassan, who died at the age of fifty in April 2024, shortly after his arrest and transfer to Ofer Prison, in the occupied West Bank. Some colleagues and fellow prisoners have stated that he died as a result of sexual violence, which led to the perforation of his intestines.

"The torture and killing of nearly a thousand health workers is a key component of the destruction of the health system," Ghassan told us that evening in London. "The Al-Shifa Hospital can be rebuilt in a couple of

years, but it took twelve years to train a doctor like Adnan al-Bursh. Considering the main medical specialists that Gaza urgently needs, it can be said that of the five pathologists present before October 7th, only two are still alive. In Gaza, there are no longer qualified doctors to perform emergency surgery. All nephrologists have been killed. A biostatistics researcher analyzed both intentional and systematic killings and found that a health worker in Gaza is two and a half times more likely than anyone else to be targeted and killed by the Israelis. Even if there is a ceasefire and the Palestinians have a respite from the bombs," Ghassan declared to a packed room of people listening in religious silence, "you can rest assured that the genocide will continue. Because thanks to this strategy, people will continue to die anyway, even from conditions that could very well be treated." Unfortunately, time has proved him right. And more than a thousand health workers have been killed between October 7, 2023, and January 2025, while over two hundred and fifty have been imprisoned.

"Genocide," Ghassan concluded, "is clearly recognized when destruction falls on everything: present, past, and future. Everything that the people of Gaza have ever been is razed to the ground, erased."

Sitting next to Ghassan that evening I felt full and empty, noble and insignificant. The strength of our words would not have saved any human lives, at least not in the immediate future. But the debate changes, day after day. Suffice it to say that, right after October 7th, our host that evening, the director of the journal *Lancet,* had described Gaza as follows: "I walked on the streets where images of 'martyrs,' in combat dress and with machine guns held across their chests, looked down from the walls over children walking to school. Or where you could see men in balaclavas, assault rifles in hand, parading unstopped. This is the environment Hamas has created and into which every new generation of Gazan children is born. It is an environment that nurtures and propagates terror."

But reducing Gaza to an "environment that feeds and spreads terror" is unjust and superficial, and generalizations such as these are misleading and dangerous. That Hamas has ruled Gaza with an iron fist is beyond doubt, and the Palestinians have been their first victims. But Hamas controlled

Gaza for some seventeen years with the approval of Israel. As for the images on the walls, many people do not know that for the Palestinians the celebration of martyrs, or rather of those fallen in combat dress, is not an exaltation of violence in itself but the desire to honor those who have lost their lives in the occupation and to remind the community that they must support its innumerable victims.

But it is true that children are affected by the environment in which they grow up. That is why, for years and years, Palestinian and Israeli human rights organizations have been imploring the world to stop the occupation, the annexation, the apartheid.

There is so much arrogance in the posture of us Westerners with respect to cultures and words of which we ignore the meaning, roots, and essence. An arrogance that is widespread in all environments — from journalism to academia, and clearly in a large part of the world of politics — which has helped to render invisible the humanity of the Palestinians, pushing their salvation farther into the distance. This is also why it is essential that the debate change, that it break down ignorance by spreading knowledge, and that we insist on asking ourselves the most important questions: What can we do to stop all of this? How long will it go on while the world seems to be sleeping a stone-cold sleep and cannot keep its eyes open in the face of this wound that is as large as an entire people, this wound that no one seems to want to soothe or heal?

EYAL

How to calculate conditions that lead to the destruction of a people?

> The genocide of one people, however, soon leads to the genocide of another, a truism borne out through the centuries by successive generations of invaders and those invaded. For the totalitarian empire being constructed in front of our eyes, punitive expeditions give life meaning. Today one group is sent to the guillotine, tomorrow a different one. The day after tomorrow it will be the turn of little Liana, and later still, we need have no doubt, it will be our turn.
>
> — ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA

ANY RIGOROUS DISCUSSION OF WHAT CONSTITUTES GENOCIDE should be based on what international law establishes in this regard. Here, then, are the first five articles of the convention held in New York by the United Nations on December 9, 1948, in the aftermath of the Holocaust that had led to the death of about six million European Jews, more than two hundred and fifty thousand Roma and Sinti, and three hundred thousand people with disabilities.

> *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*
>
> The Contracting Parties,
>
> Having considered the declaration made by the General Assembly of the United Nations in its resolution 96 (I) dated 11

December 1946 that genocide is a crime under international law, contrary to the spirit and aims of the United Nations and condemned by the civilized world,

Recognizing that at all periods of history genocide has inflicted great losses on humanity, and

Being convinced that, in order to liberate mankind from such an odious scourge, international co-operation is required,

Hereby agree as hereinafter provided:

Article I

The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish.

Article II

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group;

(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Article III

> The following acts shall be punishable:
> (a) Genocide;
> (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide;
> (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide;
> (d) Attempt to commit genocide;
> (e) Complicity in genocide.
>
> *Article IV*
> Persons committing genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in article III shall be punished, whether they are constitutionally responsible rulers, public officials or private individuals.
>
> *Article V*
> The Contracting Parties undertake to enact, in accordance with their respective Constitutions, the necessary legislation to give effect to the provisions of the present Convention, and, in particular, to provide effective penalties for persons guilty of genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in article III.

This text and the awareness of humanity on which it is based should be the indispensable basis for everyone, including those who still have some doubts in — or even believe that they have arguments to object to — considering whether all the actions carried out by the State of Israel against the Palestinian people fall fully within the definition of "the crime of genocide."

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THE FIRST TIME I heard about Eyal Weizman was in 2017, while I was writing the book *Palestinian Refugees in International Law* with Lex Takkenberg.

At that time I was living with my family in Indonesia, but I spent long periods in the Middle East, especially in Jordan and Palestine, doing

archival research and talking to people who could help me put together all the elements I was collecting to reconstruct from a legal point of view almost eighty years of the forced exodus of Palestinians from their homeland. Although it is a purely legal and technical book, I was very concerned that the history of what has been done to Palestinian people not be lost. It was essential for me to make it clear to the readers of that text how politics had determined certain legal implications: for example, in some cases, in the *non-application* of the law.

In this search for greater understanding and useful tools for me and for those who would one day read that text, I spent many afternoons in the office of Dr. Anis Kassim in Amman. He is a great lawyer and man of culture who is the author of very important legal analyses on the Palestinian question, and for many years was also the director of a scientific publication on international law, *The Palestine Yearbook of International Law.*

The ritual of our sessions was to greet all the lawyers present in the studio and then take our seats around the table, while Kassim moved a mountain of stuff from his desk full of books and files, made room, brought biscuits and tea, and then began to speak. I have always loved his calm, elegant voice, which guided me through ravines of history of which he himself had been the protagonist, such as the peace process. It was during one of these conversations that he asked me: “But have you read *Hollow Land,* by Eyal Weizman?”

I noticed that some of those present frowned at hearing that Israeli name, but knowing Kassim well enough I was sure that he would never exclude an author from his readings just because he is an Israeli. As a matter of fact, it was he who a few years earlier had recommended that I read a series of books by the Israeli historian Avi Shlaim, to whom years later I would be bound by a relationship of friendship and deep esteem.

That afternoon “Dr. Anis” — as we all call him, as a sign of respect — spoke to me at length about *Hollow Land,* which I read shortly afterward and found to be a powerful and necessary book to understanding what happened in Palestine, starting from the fact that the systematic, human,

political destruction of a people begins first of all with the creation of an empty land.

A forensic architect, Eyal uses architectural tools and digital technologies to reconstruct past events related to crimes, disasters, or human rights violations. As the founder and director of the research group Forensic Architecture, Eyal has been committed to revealing, through spatial analysis, the miserable conditions imposed on Palestinians by the Israeli occupation. *Hollow Land* traces the history of the Israeli occupation in Palestine between 1967 and 2007.

This very technical study of events, which I believed I knew well from a legal historical point of view, introduced me to new elements of a specifically geographical matrix, but also focused on the experience of a people and therefore on the unfolding of history in people's daily lives. All this has helped my understanding of violence in Palestine through the fragmentation of law, which paradoxically exacerbates — rather than resolves — geographical fragmentation.

In *Hollow Land,* it is evident that Israel has used architecture and geography as tools of power to consolidate its control over the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Urban space and the landscape have been modified to favor Israel's military and political domination. Israeli colonies in the West Bank were strategically designed so that colonization would create territorial fragmentation. The management of infrastructure and mobility, through a system of roads, checkpoints, and separation walls, have been increasingly restricting the freedom of movement of Palestinians in every respect for decades. At the same time, the transportation infrastructure continues to guarantee safe and rapid access to Israeli settlers, under the vigilant and "neutral" eyes of the international community.

A concept that was crucial for me in reading *Hollow Land* is "vertical politics": a fully three-dimensional use of space, which demonstrates unequivocally how the Israeli occupation is not limited only to horizontal borders but also addresses the control of airspace, the subsoil — for example, through tunnels and aqueducts — and the height of buildings.

Thanks to his studies, his many interests, and what I would later discover to be a polyhedric personality, Eyal recounts many things, but the gist of the book is how Israel has managed to box in the Palestinians politically by putting in place a geographical chaos "structured" to the Palestinians' disadvantage. According to him, practically anyone can be an accomplice to this system (voluntarily or voluntarily), unless he distances himself from it very rigorously:

> The spatial organization of the Occupied Territories is a reflection not only of an ordered process of planning and implementation, but, and increasingly so, of 'structured chaos,' in which the — often deliberate — selective absence of government intervention promotes an unregulated process of violent dispossession. The actors operating within this frontier — young settlers, the Israeli military, the cellular network provider and other capitalist corporations, human rights and political activists, armed resistance, humanitarian and legal experts, government ministries, foreign governments, 'supportive' communities overseas, state planners, the media, the Israeli High Court of Justice — although with differences and contradictions of their aims, all play their part in the diffused and anarchic, albeit collective authorship of its spaces.

One of the most brilliant ideas in his book is the invitation to open our eyes to the risk of the "humanitarian paradox": that humanitarian interventions may unwittingly end up supporting the military occupation rather than opposing it. Eyal believes that by correcting the consequences of certain decisions taken by the occupying force, these interventions could help rid Israel of its responsibilities, including legal responsibilities, allowing it to divert resources to other objectives, while making the occupation more tolerable in the eyes of public opinion. Starting from this assumption, we arrive at the concept that anyone operating, in any capacity, in such a serious situation must respect his own integrity even far beyond

the boundaries of the profession he is called upon to carry out in a given context. For example, as Rony Brauman of Doctors Without Borders has said, it is essential that humanitarian organizations — which sometimes gain access to areas and information that are closed to others, including journalists — use their privileged access to report and denounce the injustices observed, while maintaining independence and impartiality in their activities. According to Brauman, any health worker "goes into the field with medical instruments and comes back with an eyewitness account." The worker's task is therefore not only to treat those who are sick but also "to bear witness to the truth of the injustices committed and point out the political responsibility."

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EYAL AND I FIRST MET in person in London, where I had gone for a conference. After publishing my report on Palestinian self-determination for the United Nations, I contacted him because of the great affinity I found between our ways of analyzing the materiality and immateriality of Israel's ongoing colonial project of displacement and replacement of the Palestinian population in the occupied territory. His was a spatial point of view, mine a legal one. We met at his home on a cold morning, in the company of some of his most trusted collaborators. One thing he said that struck me most in the course of that conversation involved his relationship with Israel. "I'll only go back when I can have a Palestinian passport," he told me, leaving me stunned. That meeting marked the start of a fruitful collaboration that gradually turned into a precious and increasingly close friendship.

In February 2025, Eyal and I found ourselves side by side again in Berlin. During my visit, we should have been able to discuss the effects of Israeli military operations and the policies that have led to the devastation of life in Gaza. However, two of our speeches were canceled or sabotaged due to political pressure on universities and sponsoring organizations, throwing a truly worrying light on the decline of academic freedom in Germany.

Nevertheless, in the context of the increasing intimidation of those persisting on keeping the debate open, Eyal and I agreed that we should commit ourselves to being a light of hope, together with those Germans who do not bow to oppression and the many Jews and Palestinians in Germany who are facing an unprecedented repression in Europe. Despite the adversity and the climate of fear, our conferences were held thanks to the determination of all the people involved, even if in makeshift places and with a strong police presence.

Eyal explained a concept of home from the perspective of architecture that touched me deeply: that for Palestinians, for generations now, the home is "something you leave, not the place where you stay." Very similar to what I often say about genocide by means of settler colonialism or ethnic cleansing: for Indigenous peoples, the land is *what* you are, not where you live.

Settler colonialism, Eyal explained, is a process that operates through a dual dynamic: construction and destruction. On the one hand, outposts, infrastructure, colonies are built; on the other hand, the conditions that make life possible for the colonized population are systematically destroyed.

The conference that we were supposed to give the next day at the University of Berlin — but which the German authorities forced us to move at the last moment to a location with a much smaller seating capacity — had precisely this title: "Living Conditions Calculated to Destroy." Referring to Article II (c) of the Convention on Genocide, which prohibits imposing on a human group "conditions of life intended to cause its physical destruction in whole or in part," Eyal added on that day: "We could say that calculating the living conditions of others is in and of itself an implicit concept in settler colonialism."

This type of colonialism, according to his analysis, acts in two opposite ways: on the one hand, by improving conditions in the occupied territory to encourage the arrival of new settlers and increase the demographic weight of the Israelis; on the other, by destroying, in countless ways, the living conditions of the Palestinian population.

“The Gaza Strip,” Eyal said, “is nothing more than the result of an engineering effort aimed at destroying the living conditions within it. It is a long experiment in which living conditions are degraded to the point of forcing the population to leave.” And he was not only referring to the state of siege of the last twenty years or the genocide we have been witnessing since October 2023 but in general to the spatial and political configuration of the Gaza Strip since its creation in 1948. Gaza, according to him, has been shaped as a space where life is made increasingly unsustainable by a system that the American scholar Sara Roy has defined as one of “de-development”: progressive cuts in water, electricity, and infrastructure construction, after having created for decades the conditions to decimate and pollute the subsoil, making the aquifer unsustainable, impoverishing economic conditions, and weakening hospitals and scientific research. All this within a ghetto, because since 1948 Gaza has always de facto been a ghetto, as Eyal reminded us. Over time, the growth of the population and its unwillingness to be bent to the idea of voluntary migration — which Israel, even through the United Nations, has tried in vain to promote for decades — have led Israelis to consider drastic measures to reduce the “demographic threat” that Gaza poses to them. While the West Bank is less densely populated and there are still many ways to take care of — or avoid taking care of — its local population, Gaza is one of the most densely populated places in the world. Or, rather, it was before the genocide.

“In the last twenty years, living conditions in Gaza have been calculated so meticulously that even calories have been modulated,” says Eyal, explaining that Israel has decided how much and what food to let in, establishing the quantities based on the minimum necessary standard by age and gender. During this time, the Palestinians have also received water and electricity supplies “according to a level defined as ‘humanitarian minimum.’ “

It is striking how in the meantime the Israeli state has instead improved the living conditions in Israel’s areas adjacent to Gaza, to entice Israelis to settle there, by providing subsidies, infrastructure, and water transfers from the north to the south of historic Palestine. “It was not easy to convince new

settlers to come and live near Gaza," said Eyal — who calls "settlers" anyone who was not originally from Gaza and went to live in historic Palestine (now Israel). To that end it was essential to "calculate living conditions" in the opposite direction.

All forms of oppression against the Palestinians — ethnic cleansing, permanent occupation, apartheid, genocide — are in fact aspects of the same colonial system. And on this Eyal added an unforgettable sentence: "When certain mechanisms for calculating the living conditions of a people are already active, the moment you decide to exterminate that people, it is enough to reinforce those mechanisms and take them to their extreme consequences."

The same conclusion was reached, before the organization directed by Eyal drew up a real "cartography of the genocide" in Gaza (the interactive platform *A Cartography of Genocide* dates back to 2024), by other Israeli historians such as Ilan Pappé, who delved into the concept of ethnic cleansing in the context of the Nakba, and Raz Segal, who described the current reality in Gaza as a paradigmatic example of "explicit genocide, for all to see, without any shame." Genocide, according to Eyal, does not start from scratch, it does not consist of a sudden escalation, but is grafted onto preexisting structures and mechanisms. This is true in the case of Israeli actions on Palestine, as well as in other situations and contexts confronted by Eyal in his work as an analyst and scholar. One such example is the genocide committed in Guatemala by the government and armed forces during the early 1980s against the indigenous Mayan populations accused of supporting the left-wing rebels, or the genocide of the Nama and Herero in Namibia, when between 1904 and 1908 the German colonial forces responded to the revolt against colonial oppression with a campaign of extermination by means of deportation, concentration camps, starvation, and disease.

In both cases, Eyal says he found the same pattern, based on the destruction of the territory and living conditions as a means of extermination. "Violence is not only inflicted directly on human beings but

also on the environment that supports them: hospitals, schools, communities, places of worship."

The genocide of which Eyal speaks is a sort of archetypal model of the elimination of the Other. It is the massacre of a body by all possible means, including those of spatial destruction.

If bullets are enough to kill a body, much more is needed to kill a people: Every means must be used to ensure that the collective body is emptied, annihilated, even if it continues to move.

I imagine it as a series of continual electric shocks that, by dint of repeated strikes, extinguishes life in its very essence. Just look at the conditions of the Native Americans or of many of the First Nations people of Australia. While in nearby New Zealand, the Māori have been colonized and occupied, but their lives as a people, although restricted and not totally protected, have neither been suffocated nor completely destroyed. But for many other Indigenous peoples this is the reality. This is what is happening to the people of Palestine in their own land, just as it happened to the Jews of Europe a century ago.

After years of discrimination and persecution, racial laws were introduced, expulsion from civil life, extreme ghettoization, hunger, disease. Then — since the number of Jews in Europe continued to be high — at the command of unscrupulous criminals, the final solution was reached amid the almost complete silence of their contemporaries.

It was that unprecedented horror on European soil, that mechanized extermination on an industrial scale, that led the world to say "never again" and to define genocide as a crime.

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TODAY IN PALESTINE, the genocide that was ordered in the aftermath of the attack launched by Hamas on October 7th clearly appears as a systematic action with the intention of destroying a people through a series of military operations that have indiscriminately affected civilians, causing death and devastation everywhere. Israeli forces, with a lethal arsenal, have razed

entire cities, destroying homes, schools, hospitals, and the very networks that sustain daily life. The wounds inflicted on the Palestinian population are evident, with tens of thousands of deaths, including more than twenty thousand children, and hundreds of thousands wounded. The real figures are likely to be horrendously higher than the current official ones, but all of the million children of Gaza have been struck in body or at least in soul, silenced by indiscriminate violence that spares nothing.

From October 2023 onward, life in Gaza has become a succession of bombings and massacres, a context in which access to basic resources, such as water and medicine, has been deliberately impeded, pushing the population toward hunger, despair, and death. The words used to demonize the Palestinians — “human animals,” “there are no innocent civilians,” “not even children are innocent” — accompany a policy of violence and impunity that echoes an ignoble past that we Europeans, more than anyone else, should not have forgotten.

I will say it bluntly: To deny the seriousness of these actions is to close our eyes to a crime in progress. A crime that would call for the urgent mobilization of the international community, which unfortunately has not yet taken place to a sufficient degree, because today as yesterday, before a genocide can be stopped, it must be seen.

Genocide can be recognized by its victims: a people targeted as such. For decades, the Palestinians have been treated as an uncomfortable and unwelcome presence, even in what little land they have left — Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem — where they should have been able to build the state that they have longed for and that the international community claims to support. Instead, Israel has continued to reign with an iron fist and to drive the Palestinians out of their homes, in order to claim that land the “exclusive sovereignty of the Jewish people,” a concept that, if you think about it, was already absurd a hundred years ago, given that the land in question has never been inhabited only by Jews but was a welcoming jumble of different cultures, religions, and peoples of which the Jews constituted an integrated minority. It appears even more absurd in light of the current international legal framework, which does not tolerate

discrimination of any kind, including that of religion or “race,” this horrendous word that has done so much harm to humanity in the last five hundred years.

The ongoing tragedy in Palestine has been the chronicle of a genocide in evolution, unfortunately. Genocide analysts have long warned of the precursor signs, just like people such as Eyal have been doing: summary killings, arbitrary arrests, racial segregation. Conditions calculated specifically to bring a people to destruction.

But all of this has been systematically ignored, if not normalized, over time. The expansion of the Israeli colonies — carried out under the pretense of endless and inconclusive negotiations — has revealed just how illusory the idea of a peace is without rights. But all of this goes unnoticed because in the meantime the history of Palestine that gets told is completely different.

Italy is a perfect example of how public opinion has been progressively manipulated by politics — increasingly more aligned with the successive center-right governments in Israel (even the so-called Italian “left” with many leaders of the Democratic Party actively involved in the defense of Israeli interests) — and as a direct consequence of the indications of political leaders, by the mass media.

After September 11, 2001, with the advent of the global war on terror, the resistance of those who defend what is left of their land has been subjected to a blanket condemnation. So the Palestinians have been labeled as terrorists *ante litteram,* without a trial and without appeal, and it appears that, as such, they must be eliminated. The idea that, finding themselves in a position of oppression and subjugation, the Palestinians have a right to defend themselves from that oppression and to claim their right to effective self-determination seems to have disappeared from Italian public discourse. So, then, are our Italian partisan resistance leaders, including the former president of the Republic Sandro Pertini, Nuto Revelli, Carla Capponi, and many others whom we honor for their role in founding the Republic, to be considered terrorists as well?

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ON A WARM WINTER MORNING in Berlin, in the second year of the genocide of the Palestinian people, in front of a crowd of demoralized students and policemen in riot gear, Eyal closed his speech with a final warning: “In this case, reconstruction would not be a remedy for destruction but rather its continuation: It would be used to complete what the genocide failed to accomplish.”

I share with Eyal the dismay at President Trump’s proposal to rebuild Gaza as a Mediterranean Riviera, after having “cleansed” it of its inhabitants. A total absurdity, illegal and immoral. On closer inspection, it fits perfectly into the terms of ethnic cleansing or, rather, with the incitement to forced transfer, a crime recognized by international law, that with the latest declarations of the US administration has made its entry for the first time into the foreign policy of the United States. Forced transfers and further expropriations, in the context of this genocide, would reinforce the complicity of other countries with respect to the crimes that Israel has already committed in these last decades and aggravated exponentially in recent months, worsening even more the crisis that threatens to destroy the Palestinian people.

But the very fact that, while Eyal and I were discussing these issues, the backdrop of our conversation was dotted with police vans, officers in riot gear, and threats of arrest against me, reveals to us that the whole system in which we live has already been seriously compromised.

We are all called upon to be ready to bring our contribution, our testimony, and, as far as we can, our active commitment so that the horrors of the past and present cease to be the frame of our daily lives.

MALAK

Where is home for a refugee?

> When I travel I always take too much with me…Analysing that, I concluded that I had a secret but ineradicable fear of not returning.
> — EDWARD W. SAID, "On Writing a Memoir"

BETWEEN THE END OF the British Mandate in 1948 and the first years following the birth of the State of Israel, seven hundred and fifty thousand Palestinians were forced to leave their homes as a result of harassment, massacres, extreme violence, and the systematic destruction of their villages. This is what the Palestinians call the Nakba.

During the Nakba large areas of land were taken from or abandoned under duress by Palestinians. At first, they fled as news spread of the violence committed by the Jewish militias Irgun, Haganah, and Lehi. Then they were expelled at gunpoint, either on foot or in trucks organized by Israeli militias. Thus, in a short time, about five hundred Palestinian villages and localities were destroyed or depopulated. Historians, including Israeli ones such as Ilan Pappé, Benny Morris, and Avi Shlaim, speak of several dozen massacres with summary executions, rapes, and other crimes against the elderly, men, women, and children — such as those in Tantura and Deir Yassin — which accelerated the depopulation of historic Palestine. The destroyed villages were not simply abandoned; many were deliberately demolished, and the land was often repurposed to build new Jewish communities or for other projects within the new State of Israel.

Salman Abu Sitta, the founder and president of the London-based Palestine Land Society, which is dedicated to documenting Palestinian land and people, and many other historians and scholars of the Nakba have attested to how land abandoned by Palestinians was subsequently occupied and used by the new State of Israel. Abu Sitta, in particular, has conducted many research studies aimed at mapping pre-1948 Palestinian localities and analyzing the possibilities of return for refugees. He argues that the right of return is not only just but absolutely feasible.

For the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who have been sealed off in the Gaza Strip since 1948, the Jews who occupied their lands are nothing but colonists, colonists who from the first days of the life of the State of Israel have defended with gunfire the lands taken from the rightful owners. The kibbutzim, the agricultural communities, which many abroad saw simply as the flagship of the great socialist model of the newborn Jewish state, were used by the settlers as defensive outposts.

This painful history has been passed down among the Palestinians from generation to generation, and it is useful to recall that the dispossession of the Palestinians had already begun well before 1948, during the three decades of British colonial presence in disguise (1920–1948). The British almost uninterruptedly favored the waves of migration that led many Jews escaping persecution in Europe to settle in Palestine and build a new life in the land of “their ancestors.” But that land was already inhabited, and to the Zionist leadership of the time it was clear from the beginning that the existing population would have to be driven out.

How could you fail to teach this history or expect people to simply forget it? Imagine the cruelty of asking Armenians not to talk about the violence they suffered and the great theft of their lives, land, and culture during the genocide committed by the Ottomans, and the same is true of the Indigenous peoples of Australia, America, and so many other theaters of genocide in history.

Yet, when I was working as a lawyer for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and in the years that followed, I often had the feeling that the American

administrations expected the agency to carry out a process of *pacification* of the Palestinians. Whatever abuse had been committed in the past against their grandparents, their lands, their lives, the Palestinian people, starting in 1948, were supposed to love the new State of Israel, and certainly not challenge it and its policies.

When I arrived in Jerusalem in 2010, one of my tasks was to follow an audit of the agency's human rights program and the curricula in use at UNRWA schools.

This audit was commissioned by the United States, which at that time had always been the largest contributor to the agency's funding. I prepared what was needed for the three auditors who had arrived from the United States to conduct their own examination of school materials to ensure that there was nothing that could "incite terrorism, anti-Semitism, and violence." Nothing ever emerged regarding "anti-Israel messages, including anti-Semitic ones," but for years now these programs have still been constantly under attack, accused by the Israeli government and its allies of containing anti-Semitic messaging.

Although UNRWA, under a memorandum of understanding signed with Israel in 1967, has always dealt with some five million Palestinian refugees in the occupied territories, relieving Israel — as the occupying power — of this burden, things have changed since the peace process initiated by the Madrid Conference in 1991.

Before the Madrid Conference, the discussion around the refugee issue had almost ceased. But, in the context of the peace process, Palestinians and others began to reflect on what peace and the two-state solution would entail for refugees. A copious production of estimates, historical reconstructions, legal analyses, statistical and economic calculations reopened the refugee question and it became a thorn in the side of Israel, which had considered the question closed, dead, and buried.

During a workshop in 2017, a well-known Israeli professor from the Hebrew University said to me, nonchalantly, "It happened a long time ago, who thinks about it anymore!"

Israel does not see the Palestinians, does not listen to them, and, even more seriously, does not “hear” them. For most Israelis who speak publicly, but also for many members of the Jewish diaspora, there is only one point of view: Israel’s. How Israel experiences history, how much pain it has endured, the special context in which it moves.

Nowadays, many intellectuals, while declaring themselves moderate and opposed to the occupation, focus only on condemning the violence of Hamas, while remaining silent on the impressive numbers of Palestinian casualties and the wanton destruction caused by the Israeli army after October 7, 2023. They repeat accusations that have never been verified, such as alleged mass rape and beheaded babies, but they avoid acknowledging the ferocity suffered by the Palestinian population.

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BUT LET’S GO BACK TO 2010. To prepare for my audit I had the opportunity to visit for the first time the entire territory commonly known as the Gaza Strip and to return there several times in the following months. During one of those visits, a school hosted in its atrium an exhibition of paintings made by the children. Some of the works struck me deeply: They were not on paper, like almost all the others, but on canvas, and they demonstrated a mastery and beauty that I would not have expected in that context.

“Who made these paintings?” I asked the teachers.

“A sixth-grade girl. She’s very good, isn’t she?”

“I would like to have one of her paintings: this one,” I said, pointing to an image of two little girls with round faces and eyes as cerulean as the sky behind them, with a large potbellied dove flying by. “I would also like to meet her, is it possible?”

So, that afternoon fifteen years ago, I met Malak Mattar, who was then an eleven-year-old girl with a chubby face framed by two braids of thick black hair. I remember her as beautiful and very shy; she didn’t speak English but, through her teachers, she told me sweetly that she couldn’t sell me the painting I liked so much: First of all, because it belonged to the

school. Second, because she didn’t know how to propose a price. She would have to ask if she could accept money, but her uncle, a well-known painter from Gaza, who had taught her to paint, was not there.

Years later, I was doing an online search for an image to use for a poster advertising a lecture, when I came upon a painting of white doves flying around human figures with large eyes and soft faces, and I had an illumination. “Is this work Palestinian?” I asked.

Someone confirmed to me: “Yes, it’s Palestinian.”

“More specifically, it’s from Gaza, isn’t it?”

“Yes, the painter is from Gaza. Her name is Malak Mattar.” I had no doubts: It could only have been her, that little girl I had met briefly in one of the UNRWA schools.

I wrote to her immediately and at that point I had decided: We absolutely had to have one of her works for the poster of our event, and so it was. It was a conference organized to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the death of Edward Said, a great Palestinian intellectual and author, who had been an academic at Columbia University. The conference was held in London on October 3, 2023, a few days before the event that would forever change the lives of Palestinians and Israelis, and certainly of all the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, including Malak and her family.

From that moment on, we have always stayed in touch.

However, several years had to pass between our first meeting and the next one, which did not take place in Gaza but in London, at the end of 2024, on the occasion of the conference at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, where I spoke alongside Ghassan Abu Sitta. That evening, I immediately recognized Malak in the audience, and after the conference we were finally able to hug each other.

She told me that she had left Gaza the day before October 7th and then moved to London, where she had been admitted to the master’s program in fine arts at Central Saint Martins, one of the world’s leading schools of visual arts. Her parents and two brothers, however, had remained in Gaza and were trying to find refuge in Egypt. It would take months before they

managed to leave Gaza under very difficult conditions, after having miraculously survived the bombings.

“At first,” she explained to me, “part of my family decided to stay in the north. They thought: ‘This land is ours and we will save it. We must protect it from colonization, so we will stay here. Let them kill us, if they want, but we won’t leave.’ For many people, including my family, the decision to leave or remain has always dragged with it a strong trauma from the past: After the Nakba of 1948, those who left their lands could no longer return.”

Then, one morning, something happened that convinced them to flee the neighborhood of Rimal, where they lived: The secondary school where her mother taught was bombed a few minutes after she had left, while she was still in the car on her way home. So they moved, finding refuge farther north: first in a neighborhood called Al-Karama, then near the Al-Shifa Hospital. And during all this the family had to separate: the men in one place, the women and children in another. A crazy situation. A few days later they decided to head south. The air-raid sirens were more frequent, a sea of people were leaving their homes, and there was increased pressure for people from the north to move to the south.

“My family went to Deir al-Balah and lived at my aunt’s house for five months. It was a nightmare for me: I had just arrived in London and with all that moving around I could never get in touch with them. I had no news, I didn’t know how they were, I didn’t even know if they were alive or dead. I constantly tried to call them, but the phones weren’t working and all I got was music on the other end of the line. I went from enthusiasm for my new path at Saint Martins, which would allow me to grow as an artist, to the anguish of not knowing if the people closest to me were safe.”

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THAT EVENING, after the London event, Malak and I were only able to exchange a few words and she didn’t finish her story until many months later: In March 2025, as I was completing the drafting of this book in Italian, I had come back to London. I managed to plan a more intimate

dinner, and finally Malak was able to tell me the second part of this complicated and painful story. “And anyway, much less painful than many others,” she said immediately after sitting down at the table, even before choosing what to eat. “In the family of my friend Ahmed, for example, everyone has died in recent months. He has no one left.”

But Malak’s family managed to save themselves. “After trying in every possible way, we realized that the only way was to raise enough money to bribe the Egyptians, that is, a lot of money. Five thousand dollars for each person, a total of twenty thousand. Fortunately, they were able to recover their savings and leave Palestine to take refuge in Egypt. Finally, on the day of the evacuation, I went to Egypt and was able to see them again. They were traumatized, shocked, and even physically injured: When the building in front of theirs was bombed, the windowpanes exploded on my sister. But she herself told me that the most terrifying moments were those of the journey from Deir al-Balah to the border, littered with the bodies of people killed and left there, along the way. They prayed the whole time, but when they finally arrived in Egypt, they felt overwhelmed by some sort of guilt for having survived. My mother was beside herself. She kept telling me, ‘How could I leave so many people behind? Especially those who hosted me. And my friends, my relatives, my things…’ Even now she can’t get over it.”

Then another battle began — this time legal. The British government had refused the family visas to join Malak in London and they had to file a lawsuit to have the decision overturned. “We attended countless hearings, and the lawyers kept telling me: ‘Malak, you’re fighting a battle that you’re probably going to lose.’ But I said to myself, ‘Well, at least we’ll fight it.’ “

Their appeal, Malak says, was based on demonstrating how important it was for her to have her family by her side. The request was supported by the testimony of various experts: psychologists, sociologists, and other professionals. The main obstacle was the idea that her loved ones might be “a security threat,” and at each hearing some of the opposing lawyers would refer to them as dangerous people.

It was necessary to show that they all loved art, theater…As if, implicitly, those who were not cultured enough to love paintings and opera did not deserve this opportunity.

After endless months they won. In fact, in the first weeks of 2025, visas were issued, technically on the basis of family reunification, and her family eventually joined Malak in London. At that point in the story, she picked up her fork and with a sigh began to eat.

“Both of my parents grew up in Gaza as refugees, after my mother’s and my father’s families were forcibly displaced from their villages in 1948: My father comes from Al-Jura, while my mother comes from Al-Batani al-Sharqi, of which by now there is almost nothing left. But even if they are places that I have never been able to visit, I seem to know them well because my grandparents have always talked about them a lot. Since I was a child, I have developed a strong sense of belonging to the towns where my roots are, and of course the relationship I have with Gaza is quite complex.”

The villages Malak told me about were erased from the map of history with the creation of the State of Israel, but the land, the remains of the houses, the graves of the ancestors of the Palestinian families displaced in 1948 are still there, in Israel.

“So you don’t feel like Gaza is your home?” I asked her.

“Well,” she replied with a very eloquent smile. “Actually, yes. I am a refugee, it is not there that the story of my family took place, but it is there that I grew up and it is there that I began to learn the language of art thanks to my uncle Mohammed Musallam, who is an internationally renowned artist and who has also worked as an art teacher in Gaza. And so, yes, to answer your question, I could tell you that Gaza is not my home, but today I would choose it as my home. Even more so now, perhaps, that the neighborhood where I grew up has been practically razed to the ground and lives only in our memory. My best memories are in Gaza and, despite everything, for me it is a place where you can dream. When I was fifteen, I was invited to do an exhibition in Bristol. Of course I was very happy, and I went to my father and asked him: ‘Dad! Can I go? Will they give me permission? These people say that they will pay for everything, they want

me to go there and talk a little about my painting.' But he replied: 'Do you think Israel will allow you to go abroad for an exhibition, when it does not even give permission to leave to cancer patients, who are stuck here dying without medicine?' His words hurt me a lot, but that didn't stop me from continuing to paint, dream, and have ambitions in life. And I felt the same thing in all my friends. Each of us had the drive to achieve something."

This is a feature that has always struck me about the Palestinians. Even under a military dictatorship and a real siege — the one that Gaza has suffered in every way since 2007 — under the military (and not only military) blockade, under the occupation, in truly difficult living conditions, they have managed to preserve that drive, that love for life that shines through in every word that Malak spoke to me.

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AFTER SHE GRADUATED from high school and won a scholarship to pursue her art in Turkey, it took Malak a whole year to obtain the necessary permits to leave. From there she could have continued her studies in France or the United Kingdom, but both countries refused her a visa.

In her first year outside Palestine, she was denied entry to almost every country. The idea of freedom that she had cultivated for so long had shattered against reality. She thought that once she got out of Gaza, she would finally be free, with wings to fly wherever she wanted. But it didn't go that way. During her time in Turkey, she realized that it is not enough to leave Gaza if the whole world continues to see the Palestinians as a threat.

"In any case," she told me, raising her head, her eyes brighter, "it took quite a few attempts, but now I live here and I'm traveling so much that there is only one blank page left on my passport. Even this, for me, is resistance!" she concluded, laughing. "It's silly, isn't it?"

"I don't think so," I told her. I smiled too, but I wanted to cry thinking of Malak's vicissitudes and then of the stamps on my children's passports.

"It's important for me to be able to say to the settlers, 'You know what? I travel around the world to present my art!' This is the spirit with which I

grew up as a woman and as an artist in Gaza. Just think that at my first solo exhibition I exhibited a large painting on corruption, on the dynamics of power, and an old professor came to me and said: ‘Your painting is interesting, but you are a young woman, wouldn’t it be better to paint flowers, vases, something nice, and leave politics to men?’ Perhaps it was precisely this kind of comment that, instead of discouraging me, spurred me to go beyond other people’s expectations and to do everything I could to ensure that our voices resonated and could be heard. Indeed, these episodes were fundamental stages in my artistic career.”

The really difficult challenges, Malak told me, were quite different: The art shop where she used to buy supplies was bombed and no longer exists; the gallery in which she dreamed of exhibiting her works has been destroyed; many of the friends who frequented her house to talk and paint together have been killed. This is the reality of those who make art in Gaza: to live and create under occupation.

Her eyes on fire, she told me that when she was fourteen or fifteen, she had received a commission from the United States, from Tennessee: a painting of a Christmas tree. But when it was time to send it, she had been asked at the post office, “Is it a political work?”

Any artist living in Gaza always had to deal with a form of censorship on what they could or could not paint, on what symbols they could or could not include in their works. If an artwork was considered political, the military would confiscate it.

At that point I asked her how difficult it had been to become an artist under occupation.

“Very much so,” she replied seriously. “It was unbelievably difficult. Do you know why they hate us and want to destroy any aspect of art? Because art is hope. That’s why they killed Refaat Alareer,[*] who gave hope to so many with his poems. The most shocking reality that the occupation has to face is that we speak with the language of art, which is the most powerful language against all forms of dehumanization: Being able to reach other people with a poem or a painting is the best way to sweep away all

stereotypes. That's why I really think that art is dangerous," she concluded with a smile.

After eating, we went for a walk and crossed one of the many gardens that dot the center of London.

I looked at Malak's lunar face, very sweet but marked and hardened by violence, by oppression, while she told me that even there in London many things are very difficult for her. For example, now she is looking for a house that can accommodate the whole family when her parents manage to join her, but the rents are too expensive and, with her scholarship, it's really complex. Theirs is a wonderful scenario, because they are all alive, especially when compared to the constant anguish that Malak felt before her family managed to get to Egypt, when she knew that they had no food, that they were under a rain of bombs, and that they risked death every moment. Yet, she told me that every time they could talk on the phone, her father only asked her: "So, what are you painting these days?"

At first, Malak did not understand: "But what does it matter, Dad?"

Then he explained it to her: "You are there for a reason, Malak. You have to paint our lives, our struggle, all that we are going through. You are an artist, so you are our voice."

Those words, she told me, she will never forget. Hearing the survivor of a genocide ask her to give voice, through painting, to what her people were experiencing, was an enormous responsibility for her, and what an honor. It was from there that the idea of a monumental work took shape: a painting of almost sixteen by six feet in which she tried to convey everything she could not say in words. It came to be known as "the *Guernica* of Gaza," even though its real title is *No Words*. It is a work that was born from the heart of the ongoing genocide and is entirely in black and white, because, as she explained in an interview, "only black can reflect reality, a horrible reality that silences us." Malak no longer sees the colors of her homeland.

On the walls, graffiti shouts in Arabic and English: "Gaza will live forever" and "Gaza will persecute you." In the canvas you can see animals feeding on the corpses left to rot. In the center, a distraught man rides a donkey, his mouth wide open with pain, shock, shame. Around him, bodies

and rubble: women, men, children. The composition is dense with raw details, with a violence that saturates the space. Houses, schools, mosques, cultural centers: Everything has been destroyed. No one speaks anymore in that work.

Malak has painted silence. She has painted the disappearance of journalists, artists, poets, intellectuals. A work that freezes the blood in your veins, Malak knows that.

But her art is pure expression, without filters, both when she sees the world in black and white, and when she uses colors in her own unique way, as in the painting that illustrates the cover of this book and from which we have drawn inspiration for the title: *When the World Sleeps.*

As we say goodbye, hugging each other, Malak tells me with a sad but pungent smile: “Apparently, people are interested in seeing the pain of Gaza painted. But there is not enough paint to tell it all.”

SKIP NOTES

* this page.

GABOR

Why is it so important to preserve the memory of a people?

> Neytiri: “Sky People can’t learn, you can’t see.”
> Jake: “Then teach me to see!”
> — *AVATAR*

“A MONTH BEFORE the liberation of Budapest, while we were walking down the street, my mother entrusted me to a total stranger, because she no longer felt certain that she could guarantee my survival. The Jews were again being deported and killed by the Hungarian Nazis. She had no idea when it would be our turn, and so that day she put me in the arms of a stranger she met on the street.”

This is a fundamental memory in the life story of Gabor Maté, a doctor and psychotherapist of Canadian nationality and Hungarian origin. Today Gabor deals with trauma and healing, pivoting on his own pain to give hope to people by saying things that are extremely sensible, precious, always with great simplicity. During an event in which we were debating the situation in Palestine, I heard him say in no uncertain terms, but in a voice as quiet as a caress: “You have to be really ignorant not to know, not to understand, not to see colonialism in Palestine, or to deny that the Palestinians are the oppressed and the Israelis the oppressors.” There is something wrong, Gabor also believes, in those who fail to see how Judaism, his religion, is being exploited in the name of an ethno-nationalism that is based on the premise of a discriminatory ideology.

And this for me makes him a person who is no longer just a therapist of the individual but of the collectivity. I think that’s also why many people

listen to him. Trauma, according to Gabor, is not so much what happens to an individual externally but what happens internally in response to a painful event. An intimate wound is generated that sooner or later will inevitably manifest itself externally, potentially harming a person's emotional, psychological, and relational abilities forever. However, if the person can develop awareness and compassion, they can start a healing process.

Disconnection from self and others, which Gabor describes as an inevitable consequence of any trauma, does not only affect the individual. A person may feel isolated, distrustful, and alienated, and eventually somaticize that emotional suffering. But the same feeling can emerge from historical traumas as well and generate shared experiences that affect families, entire communities or peoples, influencing collective bonds and identities.

Indeed, as he points out, the transmission of trauma — especially when it occurs through a lack of emotional regulation — can also be interpreted in an intergenerational or collective perspective. If the adults of a society carry with them painful experiences that have left deep marks, their trauma has the power to be handed down culturally to new generations. The invisible scars of ancestors can affect the way young people perceive themselves and the world, perpetuating a cycle of suffering and disconnection that requires conscious and compassionate work, if it is to be interrupted.

Trauma, according to Gabor, "changes one's perception of the world."

When whole groups internalize a view of life influenced by their trauma, by their fear, this feeds a continuous sense of threat and mistrust in their collective view of the outside world. It is not difficult to imagine the importance of such dynamics for populations that have experienced oppression, wars, persecution, exile, and extermination. That is the eternal point of contact between Jews and Palestinians.

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THE IDEA THAT TRAUMA is central to the collective experience of Jews as well as Palestinians is a theme explored by scholars such as Amos Goldberg and Bashir Bashir. In the text they coedited, *The Holocaust and the Nakba: Between History and Trauma*, Goldberg and Bashir highlight how the collective pain, loss, and bewilderment common to these events — beyond the dramatic differences between them — have marked the identities and memories of both peoples. Thus, in the passage from one generation to the next, they have become central elements of their history, shaping not only past experiences but also current relations and struggles for dignity and justice. The act of guarding the memory is fundamental, precisely because — as Gabor explains in one of his most touching books, *The Myth of Normal* — trauma does not simply consist in what has happened, on a personal and collective level, but above all, precisely in what happens and continues to happen *inside* people in response to that experience. This is especially true when the trauma touches on something very painful: for example, the genocide of the Jews during the Holocaust, and the ongoing genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza.

According to Gabor, every authentic healing requires the courage to look our emotional pain in the face. The typical convictions of those who have suffered a trauma, such as the classic “There is something wrong with me,” are not just negative thoughts but something that continues to live in our neurophysiology, creating entire sets of interconnected mental processes. When one tries to avoid the memory of pain — by denying it, or by unconsciously hiding it under guilt, self-sabotage, or self-loathing — one effectively prevents the healing process from getting underway. Cultivating emotional memory, on the contrary, is an act of restoring the truth to oneself or to an entire population that has been wounded and outraged. Only by recognizing the wound can one begin to heal it.

Some time ago, an Israeli colleague made me realize that the Jews, and not only those living in Israel, have had many opportunities to face and soothe their collective trauma, the result of centuries of persecution culminating in one of the most horrendous genocides in history. This opportunity has materialized in moments of collective compassion and pain

expressed through days of remembrance, museums, and memorials around the world. In schools — or at least in schools in Europe, where the Holocaust was committed — the history of the genocide of the Jews is taught with seriousness and respect, offering new generations the opportunity to confront and reflect on that painful past.

Of course, it is interesting to note how little is said about the genocide of the Roma and Sinti — the Porrajmos, which in the Romani language means “great devouring,” or Samudaripen, “killing of all” — which also took place during the Second World War mainly at the hands of the Nazi regime. The extermination affected hundreds of thousands of people belonging to these communities who in many parts of Europe are still discriminated against today. The Palestinians are also still denied this opportunity. They have never been able to close the circle of their past, to process the collective grief of the loss of the land, homes, and community life they had until 1948. Not only have their rights and legitimate demands for justice for all their past suffering not been recognized; the injustices they continue to suffer today are often made invisible and are misunderstood, both by Israel and by most of the Western political system.

The genocide currently taking place in Gaza is proof of this. In the prevailing debate in the West, it seems that one cannot talk about the violence that the Palestinians experience every day without first having to consider Israel and its right to defense, even when this right is claimed by the occupier on the very little land that the Palestinians have left, and therefore illegitimately. Of course, like any member country of the United Nations, Israel can invoke the right to self-defense enshrined in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, when the conditions are met: that is, when it is attacked by another state or when there is the authorization of the UN Security Council. Israel’s use of force in Gaza and the rest of occupied Palestine is illegitimate. As the Court of Justice reminds us, Israel cannot attack militarily the population it occupies. Pure logic that is expressed in law. (But does the right to defend oneself also apply to Palestinians, yes or no?)

Moreover, it seems that one cannot talk about the current situation in Palestine without starting from the horror of October 7, 2023, almost as though decades of unspeakable violence committed by Israel against Palestinians before that date — as well as the pain suffered by Israeli civilians on other occasions, such as the wave of suicide attacks during the second intifada — count for nothing any longer. This selective reading of history leaves entire generations in a state of continuous trauma. Their trauma is renewed every day, the value of their suffering is denied, and the intensification of the violence itself persists.

The almost total lack of understanding for the rights of the Palestinians often makes them invisible, in life and in death, forced into an inevitable subordination to the logic and claims of Israel, a state that, day after day, swallows up more and more of the land of another people. Meanwhile, Israel unfailingly manages to make other people discuss its sacrosanct right to exist. It, and it alone. Wherever it wants, as it wishes, by any means it deems appropriate.

The contemporary world has demonstrated this a thousand times: What colonialism does is not only to impose its rule on a people, annihilating any possible future, but also to complete the work by sweeping away its memory. Destroying or minimizing the memory and pain of a genocide, or other atrocities, means adding a further barrier to prevent those affected by that trauma from achieving any possible form of healing.

I find it almost cathartic that to speak of these topics in strong and clear words there is someone like Gabor, who, as a Jew, has also experienced the effects of a historical and personal trauma that marked him emotionally for his entire life. Gabor now lives in Canada, as part of a “colonial society” on a land that was inhabited by other peoples before Europeans came to settle there, imposing their political power and forcing the Indigenous peoples to culturally assimilate their language and canons.

Not only have the Indigenous peoples been prevented from having the right to self-determination during centuries of colonization but they are still being prevented from preserving their collective and cultural memory. A genocide, in the broadest sense, also consists of this.

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THE LAST TIME I WENT TO CANADA, at the end of October 2024, I already knew Gabor by reputation, but he was not there, and we had not yet met. At the time, I was under a lot of stress from family problems. On the other side of the world, my mother, who had been ill for years, was facing a difficult period. I was emotionally and physically exhausted, and as often happens to me in moments of overload, I got a very strong back pain, accompanied by migraines and nausea. I remember spending the whole car trip between Ottawa and Toronto trying to meditate, to restore oxygen and calm to my back through mental exercise, but the energy available to me was very little. It was under these conditions that, the following day, I went to meet a delegation of academics from the Centre for Indigenous Studies at the University of Toronto.

In Europe or in Italy, few seem to know that Canada was the scene of a massive genocide of the Native populations.

From the mid-nineteenth century until the 1990s, Canadian governments implemented systematic policies and practices to sterilize Indigenous populations or forcibly assimilate them into the dominant culture. Assimilation took place mainly through the system of residential schools, designed to separate children from their families, forcing them to adopt the European language and values. Adoption by nonindigenous families served to sever the link with their roots, whether they were Inuit, Métis, or First Nations. Many of those children suffered mistreatment, physical and sexual abuse, and died as a result of inhumane living conditions. Recent investigations have unearthed mass graves and testimonies that highlight the horror of these genocidal policies. This process has had a devastating impact on Indigenous communities, leading to the loss of languages, cultures, and identities, and has left deep wounds that continue to affect them. In today’s Canada, the genocide is recognized, and there is a process of reconciliation underway. However, true justice for the Indigenous people of this part of Turtle Island (the name by which many Indigenous ethnic groups, including the Iroquois and Anishinaabe, call

North America) is still far away. As the UN Special Rapporteur for Palestine, I felt that it was my duty, in North America, Australia, and New Zealand, to meet with representatives of Indigenous communities.

And so that day at the University of Toronto, there were twenty people gathered around a table in addition to me and my collaborator. For a few moments, there was some embarrassment: I was not part of that group and I was unsure how to start the conversation and what procedure to follow. How do you say hello? Who is responsible for breaking the ice? However, the state of indecision did not last long, because the connection that was established immediately, the shared energy and the mutual openness, transformed that meeting into an unforgettable experience of community and compassion.

These scholars recited their welcome for me in the Indigenous languages: an invocation with words of gratitude addressed first of all to nature, recognizing the elements: water, earth, fire, air. It is a way of being in the world that marks a non-anthropocentric horizon, where man is a thread in the vast fabric of existence, not its fulcrum. A way of being in the world that gives us back forgotten proportions, returns us to an ancient wisdom with its magical symbolism: a revelation that this historical moment has the power to whisper long-dormant truths to us.

A way of being in the world that invites us to see.

Opening the meeting, one of the Indigenous scholars, who is also a musician, began to sing a song that was also ancestral, powerful, progressively more intense, one of those songs that shakes you up inside. And there, in that university classroom, it almost seemed as if the windows were rattling. The song was so awesome, so full of meaning, that at one point I was almost afraid; but it was a sacred fear, because we were no longer in a simple classroom: The singer’s voice had taken us to another space, another time.

Already at that moment, listening to the singing, I was distracted from my pain. It was as if for a moment besides me, with my suffering body, there was also something else, bigger, that was crossing through me. Like a river. Then they started passing tobacco to each other, everyone took some

and let it rest in the palm of their hand. Later, they explained to me that this is used to absorb pain. A leader had passed away and that gesture helped them to concentrate, to enter a space of deep connection before talking to others. They held that ball of dried leaves in their hands, charged it with intention, and only then did they start telling their stories. Hard, pungent stories. Many descended from mixed families: because, if not them, one or both parents had been taken from their homes and assigned to schools or adoptive families of white Canadians. Children taken away from their parents to break their lineage, to annihilate cultural transmission, to erase their identity.

Yet, one by one, those people — as well as the Indigenous communities to which they belong — are taking back the space to live their own identity. This process of liberation with a view to a reaffirmation of identity, culture, and politics was not born today, but it seems to be pulsating with a new force. And this made me reflect broadly on what is happening to all of us.

For some time now, I have sensed a growing feeling of renewal almost everywhere, as if the seeds of a revolution were germinating, preparing to rise up against political dissatisfaction. As happens in a sick body, when antibodies are activated to ensure that healthy cells come to the aid of those having difficulty in fighting diseases, the seeds of resistance, which react and mobilize in the face of injustice, in some countries, especially in the West, are the antibodies of a healthy society. There is also this momentum among various peoples of the Earth, and the solidarity of Indigenous peoples and different nations in the world with Palestine confirms this. Unfortunately, the crust to be scratched is thick. Ancient.

That day the scholars told me that the university complex we were in stands on a river that is sacred to them. “This cement is suffocating him,” they said. “They destroyed the trees, they took them away from us, but we still hear their voice.” They expressed themselves with an acute awareness, and it was as if the earth spoke through them.

Among the academics sitting around that table there were some who particularly struck me. A woman in her thirties told us that she had been adopted by a Zionist Jewish family, which caused her a double heartbreak, a

laceration of identity that is not easily bridged. Another Native woman, small but with an imposing presence, was sitting next to me. She told us that she had been a *hidden child*, that is, a child who had been hidden so as not to be taken from her family of origin. In fact, she spoke perfectly the language of its people, which others must recover to make it their own. Like her, all the people present in that room shared a very strong bond with the earth, as well as a wound, deep and alive: a trauma that they carry inside and that they can only heal by committing themselves to preserving its memory.

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SOMETIMES IT SEEMS TO ME that it is difficult for many people in Western countries to understand settler colonialism and what it entails. Most of the textbooks Western children study in school, for example, speak in neutral — if not heroic — terms of the acts of violent colonialism on which the Greek and Roman civilizations were founded, wiping out entire peoples and erasing the memory of their cultures, of their native languages, of all their knowledge. These cultural eliminations are taken for granted, not considered worthy of attention. The same is true of the most recent colonialism, the one that began with the three caravels led by the Genoese captain Christopher Columbus: an event, often romanticized as the "discovery of America," which instead marked the beginning of an era of colonization and exploitation that led to the death of tens of millions of Indigenous peoples throughout the American continent. These historical events have often been neglected but they have had devasting and enduring consequences.

So it is no wonder that most people in the West have trouble understanding what it means for a people to be destroyed and a collective body dismembered and abandoned without recognition, without treatment, causing internal wounds, traumas that are incarnated and that can rebound in the pain of many generations to come, as Gabor explains. At the same time, new awareness is blossoming today, accompanied by concrete

commitments. As in Canada and other countries, studies of Indigenous cultures and movements are being introduced or consolidated that cultivate memory, to mend and heal these deep wounds.

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JUST A FEW WEEKS BEFORE GOING TO CANADA, I held a public event in one of the bookstores of the independent Busboys and Poets chain, between Fourteenth Street and V Street NW in Washington, DC: spaces that have always hosted rebellious voices, African American literature, resistance texts, and which constitute real places of countertrend compared to the world of lobbyists that populate the streets of the US capital. During the years I was living in DC, after leaving Palestine, this was one of my favorite refuges, where I attended meetings, discussions, and book presentations, and indulged myself with reading and a cup of coffee on rainy or snowy days with my infant daughter, Leila, who traveled everywhere with me in her stroller.

The event at the Busboys and Poets was introduced by Hope, a woman of the Piscataway people, one of the many Indigenous peoples exterminated by Western settlers in the process of forming what is now the United States. She introduced herself as Firestarter, “she who lights the fire,” and brought us the offerings of her people and a greeting in the Lenape language, which she then translated for us. The Piscataway dialect has been lost, but the Lenape language shares common roots. This poem is by Nora Thompson Dean — her Lenape name was Weènchipahkihëlèxkwe, “woman who touches the leaves”—who was among the last fluent speakers of the southern Unami dialect and dedicated her life to documenting, teaching, and transmitting the spiritual and cultural traditions of her people, collaborating with scholars and institutions to preserve them for future generations.

Kuxëna Kishelëmienk,
wanishi tili nkàski nipain yushe tali, ok wèmi weltëk

kéku ènta milian, wanishi, mpi òk yu ènta kishux pèchi òxekamakuna yushe xkwithakamika
Milinèn weltëk tëmakàn tìlìch kàski ikalìchi pèchi pètawsinèn yushe ènta xkwithakamika.
Punelìntàmainèn wèmi ènta ahchanilan òk ènta ahchanaptunhe.
Wanìshi Nuxati, wètënëmai winëweokàn.
Na në lekèch.

Our Father who created us,
Thank you that I can be here in this place, and for all the good things that you have given me, thank you for the water and for the sun that shines on us on this Earth.
Give us a good path, so that we can continue to live longer here on this Earth. Forgive us when we do what is wrong and when we say something wrong.
Thank you, dear Father, and accept this plea from me.
Amen

It was very emotional to be welcomed like this, and it also seemed instructive to the hundreds of people who had come to listen to the debate. That is precisely what we must do: take every opportunity to learn to see better, to understand, to preserve and honor the memory of what has disappeared, by fighting alongside those who resist, to help us to heal the wounds of the offended peoples.

The union of different struggles for self-determination, still unfinished, is a path that is built with so many acts, practical and symbolic, of rupture with the past, that we can learn to make part of our daily life every time we have the opportunity.

As I asked in my opening remarks at the event hosted by Busboys and Poets, how is it possible that for decades, we have gathered in North America to talk about Palestine, without ever involving the Native peoples

who have lived — and still live — a colonial and genocidal experience in these lands?

So, a few days after that meeting in the bookshop, when I found myself presenting my report to the United Nations, I began my speech like this: “We are meeting today on the land of the Piscataway Nation, which still belongs to them.” And I made the salute to the land that I had learned from Hope.

I was amazed at how little importance was given to this incipit of my speech. It was not particularly important for anyone to note that in that beautiful building where the official meetings of the United Nations are held, with its many floors and its imposing glass-and-steel facades that reflect the sky and the surrounding city, someone said: “Today we find ourselves on a land that belonged to a people — the Native Americans — who were victims of genocide, committed by one of the permanent members of the Security Council.” In those rooms pulsated a palpable contrast between the presumed elegance of power that is expressed through overbuilding, and the land below, which lies forgotten, marked by stratifications of history, suffering, and struggles.

No one is free until everyone is free. *All of them.* All those who have been made invisible on this Earth; all the peoples whose memory, traditions, and culture have been reduced to folklore; all those who still have the realization of freedom from oppression and need only as a horizon and not as a present. In America there are now museums about Native Americans, such as the National Museum of the American Indian in DC, where traditional clothes and the reconstruction of tents are on display along with the typical covers made of feathers and wax reproductions of scenes of life at the time when the tribes lived their lives freely, immersed in nature and surrounded by bison. As for the story of the extermination of the vast majority of Native Americans, however, very little can be deduced from the legends that accompany the various historical images. It almost seems that the Native Americans became extinct on their own, and not because of a series of devastating policies and actions of aggression undertaken by the European colonies that settled in the “New World” from the sixteenth

century onward. Then, in the seventeenth century, the strongholds established by the colonists and the progressive expansion of their dominions for the exploitation of natural resources led to various conflicts with the Indigenous populations, who were often forced to cede their lands. Wars and the spread of European infectious diseases, against which the Native populations had no defenses, contributed to a dramatic demographic decline. These factors were exacerbated by policies of famine and forced transfer, such as the infamous Trail of Tears in the 1830s, which lead to the evacuation and death of many Cherokee and other tribes.

Although many tribes are now federally recognized, life on the reservations remains very difficult. After having gone through centuries of violence and the destruction of hundreds of tribes, Native communities still face serious problems today: Access to natural resources is very limited and the US government has never officially recognized the genocide — or rather, the genocides — suffered by Native peoples.

The lack of historical justice leaves the descendants of survivors in a fragile condition, facing daily challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and difficulty in accessing essential services.

In Canada there is a little more evolution than in the United States, since at least there the genocide is recognized. In all public events it is customary to state that we are on land belonging to Native peoples who have never renounced their land and their culture. Homage is paid to them, to their ancestors, and to their leaders, past, present, and future, but care must be taken that this recognition is not only performative, and that there is a real commitment to eradicate discrimination against the Indigenous people, and that tribute is not paid in public but then the policies of subtraction of land and resources continue, as happens in Canada, but also in Australia and New Zealand — and in Palestine.

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WHEN I THINK OF HOPE'S INTRODUCTION to our meeting at Busboys and Poets, I fear what might happen in Palestine if the plan of the current Israeli

government, supported by the Trump administration, were to be effectively carried out. Forty years from now, someone may be in a place once known as Palestine, but in a university lecture hall named after Donald Trump, offering tribute “to the Palestinians, the ancient inhabitants of this land,” when all that remains of Palestine will be ruins.

This is why it is so important to fight together to understand, know, and preserve the memory of our collective history and defend those who remain.

This is why human rights perform an almost therapeutic balancing function: They remind us that we too are human, despite the fact that we may find ourselves on the side of power. We know well that, by nature, human beings are vulnerable, complex, fractured. And this fragility is inevitably also reflected in the colonizer, in whom it is often possible to find a bit of the drama of the colonized. How can we forget the tragedy that struck Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century, when in just under five years some one million Irish were killed by hunger, typhus, and cholera, while almost two million were forced to emigrate? Today, 20 percent of the white American population is among the descendants of those migrants, and this tells us that while the Irish were trying to rebuild their lives in America, they in turn contributed, knowingly or unknowingly, to the colonial system that existed in North America.

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I REMEMBER WHEN I saw *Avatar* for the first time, while living in Jerusalem. I came away with a very clear thought: “What a turning point for Palestine, this film!” In that story there was everything: the invasion, the extraction of resources, the connection with the land, the resistance, the anchor of spirituality for the oppressed people.

Outside the theater, I was struck that so many Israelis were coming out crying. It took me a while to understand, listening and chatting with fellow moviegoers, that they were not crying because of what I had seen but because they too felt part of the Na’vi people. They identified with the

persecuted, with those who were driven from their land by an invincible and superhuman military force.

This made me aware that, by virtue of the persecutions suffered for centuries in Europe and Russia, many Israelis carry with them a certain type of memory of pain, just like the one Gabor talks about: a form of emotional dissociation that can also be unconscious, but which still leaves its traces. Whether it is real or projected, it remains in the body, in the language, in the imagination. For me, understanding this complexity makes the whole situation we are experiencing much less banal.

When people are called upon to commit to human rights, I think they must do so from a *human*, radical point of view, but also a radically open mind, where there can certainly be right and wrong acts without the need to separate the "good" people from the "bad" people. Therefore, it is possible to embrace everyone as human beings. *Everyone.*

There is something profoundly distorted in those who fail to recognize the humanity of the Other.

For many Israelis, this means not being able or willing to see Palestinians as human beings. And the same is true for those among the Palestinians who struggle to recognize the humanity of the Israelis.

Fortunately, although they are still not enough, there are Israeli citizens and Jews in the diaspora who are fighting for Palestinian rights. This is precisely the meaning of the motto "decolonize your mind," which means breaking down boundaries and barriers, doing our best to free ourselves, on both sides, from the superstructures that prevent us from staying in touch with what is most human and true that we have in common.

"The great mother doesn't take anyone's side," says Neytiri in *Avatar.* "She only protects the equilibrium of life."

To preserve the humanity of others, to commit ourselves to continuing to see their uniqueness without normalizing or flattening them, is in itself a contribution to the fight against genocide. All colonizers and all instruments operate not only by killing people materially but also by erasing the identity of a people.

What was the sense of the numbers that were tattooed on prisoners' arms in concentration camps, if not this? Within that space their name was no longer meaningful, and part of the struggle for survival consisted in the precious act of being able to remember who they were and who they had been, preserving the sense of what is highest in human beings even in the face of something that demonstrates the opposite.

Cordelia Edvardson, deported at the age of fifteen to Theresienstadt and then to Auschwitz with the number A3709, for decades was the correspondent from Jerusalem for one of Sweden's leading newspapers, as well as one of the first Jewish voices to denounce the atrocities committed by the State of Israel against the Palestinian people. She wrote about her concentration camp experience in the book *Brȁant barn sȍker, sig till elden (Burned Child Seeks the Fire,* Beacon Press, 1998). Her stories evoking the memories of a young girl, little more than a child, show very clearly how fundamental it was for her to cling to culture, knowledge, poetry to continue to see herself as a human being in the true and noble sense of this term. So the story of Demeter and Persephone — the princess who, like the seed, enters the shadows of the earth and then emerges at the right time with her flower and her fruit — is not only a beautiful myth but a promise of rebirth that nourishes the heart, reminding us of who we are, who we can be.

We Are Not Numbers, the organization of emerging Palestinian writers, was also born from the awareness that victims of war and extermination are exposed to many risks, including that of losing their identity under avalanches of statistical data and death counts. In places like Gaza, such periods have always been cyclical. The victims end up no longer having faces, stories, names; they become numbers in the war bulletins to which, day after day, people seem to become accustomed.

In 2015, in a Gaza already scarred by siege, the poet Refaat Alareer, who always believed in the power of the word as a form of resistance and care, wanted to overturn this logic by teaching literature and poetry and helping many young people in Gaza through the power of creative writing. Along with other activists, writers, and organizations, Refaat was very

committed to supporting We Are Not Numbers, with the aim of restoring the dignity of narrative to the victims and survivors of every Israeli crime in Gaza. Through writing workshops, many Palestinian children were able to tell their personal stories, their dreams, what they had lost, and that part of hope that remained, to affirm themselves as complete human beings, beyond the labels and numbers of the news.

Refaat was killed in an Israeli bombing on December 6, 2023, along with his brother, sister, and four children. The last video that remains of this professor who loved Shakespeare, who had learned Hebrew and kept the need to rehumanize Israelis as a cornerstone of his mission to his friends and students, lasts less than a minute. Refaat is visibly upset and struggles to hold back his tears, but he manages to keep his voice firm and clear as he says: “We are aware that the situation is very bleak, without hope, with no way out. If there is no water, if we cannot get out of Gaza, what should we do? Throw ourselves into the sea and drown? Commit mass suicide? Is this what Israel wants? Well, we won’t. The other day I was saying to some of my friends: I am an academic, probably the most dangerous object I keep at home is a felt-tip pen. But if the Israelis invade us, if they go house to house to slaughter us, I will use that felt-tip pen, I will throw it at them, even if it is the last thing I can do in my life. That’s how we all feel: in a state of absolute helplessness, with nothing left to lose.” He was forty-four years old.

Today we can commemorate him by spreading, each of us in our own way, the knowledge of what is happening to the Palestinian people, because knowledge is crucial and memory is indispensable in every healing process, as Gabor teaches us.

We can remember Refaat with an excerpt from the preface to a book in which he collected the stories of many Palestinian boys and girls, which is entitled *Gaza Writes Back.* Not “Strikes Back,” not “Fights Back,” but *Writes Back.* Atrocities suffered can also be reacted to with the weapon of a story, or a felt-tip pen.

> Gaza writes back because storytelling helps construct Palestinian national identity and unity. Gaza writes back because there is a Palestine that needs to be rescued, at least textually for the time being. Gaza tells stories because Palestine is at a short story's span. Gaza narrates so that people might not forget. Gaza writes back because the power of imagination is a creative way of constructing a new reality. Gaza writes back because writing is a national obligation, a duty to humanity, and a moral responsibility.

ALL PALESTINIANS, and not only Palestinians, love to remember Refaat with white kites, a tribute to his poem "If I Must Die":

> *If I must die,*
> *you must live*
> *to tell my story*
> *to sell my things*
> *to buy a piece of cloth*
> *and some strings,*
> *(make it white with a long tail)*
> *so that a child, somewhere in Gaza*
> *while looking heaven in the eye*
> *awaiting his dad who left in a blaze —*
> *and bid no one farewell*
> *not even to his flesh*
> *not even to himself —*
> *sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above*
> *and thinks for a moment an angel is there*
> *bringing back love.*
> *If I must die,*
> *make it bring hope*
> *make it be a tale.*

MAX

It takes two to tango.

And if I fall, let me fall graciously.
And if I rise, let me rise gracefully.

AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS BOOK I said that I had chosen ten people as the focal point for my stories, since from each of them I learned something essential about Palestine. The first is Hind; the second is Abu Hassan; the third is George; the fourth is Alon; the fifth is Ingrid; the sixth is Ghassan; the seventh is Eyal; the eighth is Malak; the ninth is Gabor.

The tenth is Max. My life partner, the person with whom I set foot for the first time in Palestine and the one with whom, three years later, I decided to leave Palestine. But Palestine is like that: You can also choose to leave it, but for those who have been there, have seen it and experienced it, it will not be the one who leaves you. My life is proof of this.

In the early days, when we moved to Jerusalem, Max and I traveled a lot, we kept moving in search of understanding that land and, paradoxically, it was as if we did not see its confines. Turning on the trail of historic Palestine, in that initial period we were in Nazareth, we visited Galilee, the coastal area, from Haifa to Jaffa, and then the south, the desert. All of this is now part of the State of Israel. Moving in that land, we learned to familiarize ourselves with its wounds. Evident wounds, carved in stone. On Sundays we went for walks in the forest around the city, on the hills surrounding Jerusalem, which are also now part of Israel. The forest under which the village of Ein Karem is located, with its square stone houses surrounded by citrus and jasmine trees. On those walks we got to know

better many friends who stayed with us for a long part of their lives, and there we began to understand what the Palestinians meant when they said: “Even the stones here tell our story.” Walking in the forest, for example, we often happened to come across ruins of houses, fragments of masonry. They were the remains of Arab villages that were depopulated and destroyed in 1948 during the Nakba, and on which carpets of trees were planted. Many are the gift of the Jews of the diaspora to the State of Israel, which is projected into the world as a beacon, a hearth, for all Jews.

We discovered that land little by little, and some time after we had taken up residence in East Jerusalem, protests began in Sheikh Jarrah, right in the area where we lived, on a hill in a part of the city that was as beautiful as it was devastated. But all of East Jerusalem is a disaster, with the Palestinians paying very high taxes, and in return they receive minimal services; waste collection and electricity amount to only 13 percent of what they pay; we also paid a very high municipal tax. Many Palestinian families, like our friend George’s, lived around and in front of us, and many were literally driven from their homes before our eyes. Meanwhile, the settlers arrived, supported by organizations such as Ateret Cohanim, Ir David Foundation, Israel Land Fund, who started real legal battles against the Palestinian resident kings, presenting property titles of dubious authenticity dating back to the Ottoman Empire. And yet the Israeli courts have accepted those deeds, allowing the eviction of Palestinians who, having nowhere else to go, ended up in the houses built by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), on land that from 1949 to 1967 was administered by the Jordanians. We witnessed some dramatic scenes: families chased away even in the middle of the night by the police who threw out kitchen utensils, tables, beds. Some Israelis came to protest, but there were very few. The Palestinians, for their part, did not want simple protests but concrete actions, especially on the part of Jewish Israelis: those who vote. From those who have rights in Israel and cannot think that it is enough to limit themselves to protesting once a week with tambourines and banners, in Sheikh Jarrah. This was openly said by the people of Lecce who refused to join those protests in 2010. Thus, we too

had found ourselves involved in the roar of the demonstrations, in which Max actively participated (my work with the United Nations prevented me from doing so). And that's how Max met so many pacifists in Tel Aviv, some of whom we remained friends with, even if it has now become impossible to see them again.

After years of knowing each other and talking about many things, it was there in Jerusalem that I saw Max's political spirit fully emerge and be put into practice. I was struck by this aspect of him, because he proved to be someone who throws himself into things in the first person, with his refined intellect, as an upright thinker, first of all. He felt the same intolerance toward injustice as I did, in fact he often went with the Israelis of Ta'ayush, an organization that deals with interposition between settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank, physically accompanying the Palestinians in their daily activities — such as cultivating the land or taking the animals out to pasture — in order to protect them from aggression, document any abuse, and act as a deterrent to violence. Often, on Fridays, he joined them, or took part in the protests in Ni'lin and Bil'in. One day he returned from a visit to an olive grove with a basket full of black rubber balls. I had never seen anything like it: They were tear gas canisters, which the Israeli army had thrown at the protesters. "Christmas is approaching. Let's decorate the tree," he said with his usual sarcasm.

Max could write a book about the years we spent in Jerusalem, about his experience with the Israeli peaceful resistance movement. He saw in that movement the essential germ of something destined to travel for a while on two separate and parallel binaries, one for the Palestinians and one for the Israelis, who would still have a separate piece of road to go before merging. For many Israelis, the privilege to be renounced in order to welcome the Palestinians as a free people is too high.

I remember beautiful moments of life in Jerusalem. We had so many landmarks in town: our favorite falafel place; the Educational Bookshop, where Max had met George and even now the owners remember my husband, because he used to hold Zoom meetings upstairs and when he spoke you could only hear his voice! Yet the period in Jerusalem was very

heavy for me. It cost me a lot to live immersed in apartheid. Jerusalem, as well as the rest of the Cisjordan, is a dystopian city.

Every time someone came to visit, we ended up retracing the ordeal of the occupation. Where did we take them, our guests? Certainly not Tel Aviv or Nazareth. No, we took them to see the epicenter of the occupation: Jerusalem, the Old City and the part cut off from the wall, Bethlehem scarred by the wall, Hebron invaded by violent settlers, the Bedouins displaced everywhere from the Jordan Valley, and then Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarem, the Balata camp. How many of our friends and relatives who have come to visit us have changed their minds about Israel and Palestine? There were those who came with opinions that were lined up a priori, in defense of Israel to the bitter end and without any sympathy for the Palestinians, who they saw as troublemakers and "terrorists." No one returned to Italy with the same opinion toward Israel. Some of our friends have had hysterical reactions: "But what do I care about coming to Hebron?" "I didn't come here to see these monsters!" "Why do you take me to where all these soldiers are?" "I am afraid, in the midst of all these armed people! I'm scared! You are not normal!"

After a couple of similar scenes, at a certain point we reduced a little the traffic of people we were taking around the nerve centers of the occupation. But Max and I continued to visit Palestine. We have found our niches of relief, even in the middle of the ongoing colonization. For example, Sebastia, a small village perched in the hills of the West Bank, a few kilometers from Nablus. Upon arriving, a landscape dotted with Roman columns, remains of temples, an amphitheater hidden among the olive trees, a crusader basilica now in ruins, and in the center of the village, among the stone houses, what according to tradition should be the tomb of John the Baptist opens up before us. That magical place was our refuge, with the Roman ruins and the Old City largely recovered by an Italian Palestinian couple, both architects, who had made it the first form of widespread hospitality that Max and I had seen. I remember the guesthouse and the house where mosaic courses were held, immersed in the heart of the small village. The Palestinian residents could not do much, because the whole

area was under the control of the Israelis, who did not allow either development or recovery plans, but the part of the village managed by the Palestinians had been transformed into a network of cozy houses, a vanguard of the entrepreneurial resistance. There we made our last trip before leaving Palestine. I was five months pregnant with Leila.

Now, when I think of Sebastia, my heart tightens, because the Israelis are destroying it.

I also remember the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip in 2014, in which two thousand people died, including more than five hundred children. We were in Washington, DC. I spent hours with Leila clutched to my chest, reading the news that arrived from Gaza. How many UNRWA colleagues killed, how much destruction! It seemed to us an unimaginable thing at the time. And in those days it was Max who urged me to say yes to the proposal that my former colleague Lex Takkenberg had been to making me for two years: to write a book on Palestinian refugees with him. “Don’t worry,” Max told me. “If you find the funding, great. If not, never mind. Dedicate yourself to something that is useful. Because it’s really important to understand the Palestinian refugee issue better.”

I was full of doubts, but that’s when I said to myself, “You know what? Let me think about it for a moment. Actually, I don’t know how to write a book, but I will understand it, I will learn how to do it.”

At that time Max supported me a lot, and also during the preparation of the book, when, with my somewhat obsessive-compulsive nature, I felt like I could no longer let go of that creature that grew up with my children, occupying so much time, space, and enormous amount of mental energy. Much of that book was written between DC and Indonesia. Our friends joked: “It is easier to see Francesca without her children than without her computer.”

I must admit that I have never been very good at constructing borders between my work and my private life, and the barriers totally collapsed when I began my term as UN Special Rapporteur in 2022. In the beginning it was very difficult for our family life. Until then, even though I had a time-consuming job, I had always taken care of raising the children — from

getting them ready for school to getting them into their pajamas — of the house and the common chores, shopping and vacations. Suddenly, I was no longer able to take care of very much, apart from myself. The first summer that we spent in Sicily, I devoted to the preparation of my report on self-determination, taking refuge to write on the terrace of the Lido dei Ciclopi while Max and the kids went swimming and enjoyed the attention of friends and relatives; the second summer was very much the same, with interviews of the Palestinian children while preparing the report on childhood in Palestine.

And then came October 7th, which took away the world as we saw it and lived it before, completely and suddenly. For the first time we were able to take three days of vacation with the children at a resort near Tunis, after the delivery of my report on minors. I had just returned from London, where I had given a lecture on the twentieth anniversary of Edward Said's death. I remember that chilling morning, when we were woken up by incessant phone calls that forced us to get out of bed and fiddle with the remote control to connect to Al Jazeera. In front of the television, at six in the morning, trying to understand what had happened, both of us were speechless.

"But what did they do? How many people…how many children have they killed?" Of those first hours I remember the shock in the absence of full understanding of what was happening, the fear for what was and would be, the pleas for Max to take the children out of the room. At nine o'clock I had regained control of the situation, I was on the phone nonstop and had begun to respond to journalists' requests. The first sentences spoken in those days, which I still hear echoing heavily within me, were: "I hope that the world will be able to embrace Israelis and Palestinians in a spirit of compassion and common sense. May they both find themselves in this moment of acute pain and understanding of the other's trauma." No one on the political spectrum has welcomed them, unfortunately.

Meanwhile, Max and I continued to experience everything together, including what concerned Palestine.

During this last year and a half — the era of the genocide — Max has changed again, putting himself completely at the helm of the family and becoming my number one support. It's true, at the beginning I would get some digs like "Look, I have a job too, eh," or "You're never there anyway," in the face of my absences from school activities for the children, for example. Over time, however, it has changed a lot. Sometimes he gets angry because I work too much, because I never put limits on anything or anyone. But he always supports me. Even when he thinks my tweets are too provocative. In fact, it is always Max who tells me: "Go at them with your stiletto, because when you are brutally honest people love you even more."

So I am grateful to him for his support.

And I also thank him for his work in economic analysis and for what he has written about Palestine. I do not forget that, in one of the last reports that my predecessor, Michael Lynk, wrote for the United Nations, in 2021, when he did not even know that I existed, he was strongly critical of the World Bank for helping to normalize the Israeli occupation. He added, however, that the only World Bank report worth keeping was the one on the costs of employment in the West Bank for the Palestinian economy, which was the first one Max had worked on when he was hired by the World Bank in 2012.

Thank you, Max, because you are always full of ideas. Thank you because you are good and generous, and because it would make no sense for me to talk about Palestine without you.

Thank you for the tears you have collected in recent years, and for those you have helped me not to shed, with your strength and incendiary irony. Thank you for supporting me in these burdensome years, always encouraging me to persevere. Even in the face of the horror of death, which although physically distant has blown oppressively on our lives, tearing our nights apart for long months. Thank you for the many times you have helped me to transform sadness and anger into determination, allowing me to act incisively, without ever backing down. Thank you for helping me to see, understand, and begin to expose to others the mafia nature of the system against which we fight together, in order to build a present of which

we do not have to be ashamed, and to not mortgage further the future of our children and other children, who are always children.

CONCLUSION

The habit of hope.

Upright I walk…
Head high I walk
An olive branch in my hand,
My coffin on my shoulder
…. I walk and I walk
My heart is a red moon,
My heart is an orchard
With boxthorn and basil
My lips a sky raining
Fire at times, love always.
An olive branch in my hand,
My coffin on my shoulder
…. I walk and I walk
— SAMIH AL-QASIM, "Upright I Walk"

IT IS WHEN THE WORLD SLEEPS that monsters are generated.

We already have many monsters among us. First among them, our indifference.

—

AS MARIAME KABA, an African American educator and activist, says, hope is a discipline. And I would like to add that hope can, and should, also become a predisposition, a habit: something that we consider indispensable and to

which we are so attached that we cannot do without it, beyond any logic or reasoning.

Even if doing so is not always as easy as saying it.

—

FEBRUARY 2025. I returned home, to Tunis, after a difficult experience in Germany. Between the fear of being arrested and separated from my family for who knows how long, and the awareness of the seriousness of what was happening in Europe, I felt an inner agitation that I don't think I had ever felt before. I felt like I was in a state of post-traumatic stress, and maybe I was. The fact is that my nerves were on edge, I was spouting off for everything, I found myself arguing with my children, raising my voice for trivial things. I was not myself. My own family looked at me without seeing me, without finding me.

Then something very special happened. While my husband had taken the children out for a walk and I continued to pace around the house like a caged lion trying to regain my composure, a small book caught my attention as I walked past the bookcase in my bedroom. *Peace Is Every Step*, by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

Without even realizing it, I began to leaf through the book and it struck me like lightning, as if suddenly those pages had begun to speak to me. If they were to read it, many of my friends probably would not understand my enthusiasm, since Nhat Hanh uses such essential language that it could perhaps be misunderstood as simplistic. Instead, those words hit the mark precisely because they were so clear and spoke to me of something that at that moment was both unfeasible and necessary: the idea of bringing back *within me* that peace for which I fight every day. It reminded me that, if you want to achieve change, first of all you have to *be* change, and that you cannot change anything if you do not change yourself in some way; that you cannot work for peace in the world if you do not first of all have inner peace, if you are not a true peacemaker. This is a concept that is quite familiar to me and even dear, at least in theory. In fact, reading that book, I

was reminded of a speech I had made in 2023 at the opening of the Peace March in Assisi, where I had been invited by the peacemakers and had said more or less this: “If we don’t start with ourselves, what are we left with? Peace is built with peace, not thinking about war, so we have to change the way we live and see things. Why are children taught *conflict management* instead of *restoring peace*? Why must conflicts be managed rather than avoided? What has happened to diplomacy? Where has it gone?”

But bringing peace into our everyday lives, making that hope our habit, is the greatest of challenges, and in this effort, the little book that providentially caught my attention on that difficult day explains that there is and there cannot be any distinction between our politics and our living in this world.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s words made me reflect very deeply. With how much anger, with how much violence was I stamping my feet on the earth that supports me? For the first time in too many days, I remembered my yoga practice and took a truly deep breath. I let myself fall back into the sofa, I squeezed my eyes closed for a moment, and then I started reading again.

> When I was in Vietnam, so many of our villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who were suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection, we decided to do both — to go out to help people and to do so in mindfulness. We called it engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. Otherwise, what is the use of seeing?
>
> We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help. If we maintain awareness of our breathing and continue to practice smiling, even in difficult situations, many people, animals, and plants will benefit from our way of doing things. Are you massaging our Mother Earth every time your

> foot touches her? Are you planting seeds of joy and peace? I try to do do that with every step, and I know that our Mother Earth is most appreciative. Peace is every step. Shall we continue our journey?

PEACE IS ALSO *MINDFULNESS*: being aware of what you are doing at any given moment. When we eat, when we move, when we think, when we are with our children. How many times do we lose presence, in every action of our day? How many times do we hurry unnecessarily or let ourselves be distracted by something that seems more important than what we are doing? These are the questions that little book brought me back to, inviting me to give myself time for a few breaths without gasping, bringing my attention to the air that enters and leaves my body.

At that moment I remembered an evening a few years ago, when I was in Rome to participate in a conference. At that time — it was December 2023 — the genocide was already underway and in response to the externalization of my fear, I said: “One day there will be peace in Palestine, but at what price? I am terrified of what will come next, because, with all the pain and suffering that is being done to those in the West Bank and Gaza, I dare not imagine the violence that could be unleashed against the Israelis.” A man from the audience raised his hand and asked to speak.

It was Wasim Dabash, an Italian Palestinian professor of history at Sapienza University in Rome, who replied to me: “No. There will be no violence. If all this stops, when it stops, if there is no more violence, there will be no more violence. Because we Palestinians are not sustained by a thirst for revenge but for justice. From 1948 to today we have tried, as it was before, to return to Palestine, and to live in peace. And it is clear that there were reactions to oppression, actions of resistance, when the cup was overflowing. But most Palestinians have never taken part in violent actions against Israelis. For almost all of us, being religious does not mean being bigoted, it means having God inside, that is, the love of life, honoring both what remains and what is gone as something that must be brought into this life, and not as something for which one may want to die.”

For me it was a very important revelation, which allowed me to understand that even there, at that conference, without realizing it, I had brought my Western lens, which is accustomed to thinking in terms of the law of retaliation. The words of that wise teacher, however, reassured me and also taught me something important about the meaning of hope.

—

SOMETHING THAT I HOPE I have also transmitted to those who have read this book is the idea that each of us can become a spokesperson and bearer of that hope, learning day after day to adopt it as a posture, a good habit that we can no longer do without.

You can be a journalist, a baker, or a lawyer, it doesn't matter what you do but *how* you do it, how you conduct yourself. Because — as Thich Nhat Hanh writes — what is the use of seeing, if not acting?

So I hope that anyone who reads these pages, now that they have met the people who helped me open my eyes to see more clearly and to act for Palestine, will take with them the idea that they can be light, always, in any corner of the Earth.

Francesca Albanese, March 2025

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